

**STRATEGY**

# Democratic revolution and the contradiction of capital

What is meant by a 'democratic republic'? Chris Cutrone critiques Mike Macnair's *Revolutionary strategy*

**M**ike Macnair's *Revolutionary strategy* (London 2008) is a wide-ranging, comprehensive and very thorough treatment of the problem of revolutionary politics and the struggle for socialism. His focus is the question of political party and it is perhaps the most substantial attempt recently to address this problem.

Macnair's initial motivation was engagement with the debates in and around the French Fourth International Trotskyist Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire prior to its forming the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste electoral party in 2009. The other major context for the discussion was the Iraq anti-war movement and UK Respect electoral party, which was formed around this in 2004, with the Socialist Workers Party driving the process. This raised issues not only of political party, democracy and the state, but also united fronts among socially and politically heterogeneous groups and the issue of imperialism.

One key contribution by Macnair to the latter discussion is to raise and call attention to the difference between Bukharin's and Lenin's writings on imperialism, in which the former attributed the failure of (metropolitan) workers' organisation around imperialism to a specifically *political* compromise with the (national) state, whereas Lenin had, in his famous 1916 pamphlet, characterised this in terms of compromised "economic" interest. So with imperialism the question is the political party and the state.

Macnair observes that there are at least two principal phases of the party question: from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries; and beginning in the middle of the 19th century. He relates these phases to the development of the problem of the state. He offers that constitutional government involves the development of the "party state" and that revolutionary politics takes its leave of such a "party state" (which includes multiple parties all supporting the constitutional regime). Furthermore, Macnair locates this problem properly as one of the nation-state within the greater economic and political system of capitalism. By conflating the issue of government with "rule of law", however, Macnair mistakes the contradiction of the modern state and its politics in capitalism.

Elsewhere, Macnair has criticised sectarian Marxism for "theoretical overkill" in a "philosophy trap".<sup>1</sup> But he might thus mistake effect for cause: 'philosophical' questions might be the expression of a trap in which one is nonetheless caught; and Marxist 'theory' might go beyond today's practical political concerns. Philosophy may not be the trap in which we are caught, but rather an expression of our attempts - merely - to think our way out of it. The mismatch of Marxism today at the level of 'theoretical' or 'philosophical' issues might point to a *historical* disparity or inadequacy: we may have fallen below past thresholds and horizons of Marxism. The issue of political party may be one that we would need to re-attain rather than immediately confront in the present. Hence, 'strategy' in terms of Marxism may not be the political issue now that it once was. This means that, where past Marxists might appear to be in error, it may actually be *our* fault - or a fault in the present situation. How



**Conflict and contradiction**

can the history of Marxism help us address this?

## New politics

The key to this issue can be found in Macnair's own distinction of the new phenomenon of party politics in the late 19th century, after the revolutions of 1848 and in the era of what Marx called "Bonapartism" - the pattern set by Louis Bonaparte, who became Napoleon III in the French Second Empire, with its emulation by Bismarck in the Prussian empire, as well as Disraeli's Tories in the UK, among other examples. While Macnair finds some precedent for this in the 18th century UK and its political crises, as well as in the course of the Great French Revolution 1789-1815, especially regarding Napoleon Bonaparte, the difference of the late 19th century party-politics from prior historical precedence is important to specify. For Macnair it is the world system of capitalism and its undermining of democracy.

It is important to recall Marx's formulation, in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that (neo-) Bonapartism was the historical condition in which the bourgeoisie could "no longer" and the proletariat "not yet" rule politically the modern society of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Bonapartism was the symptom of this crisis of capitalism and hence of the need for socialism revealed by the unprecedented failure of revolution in 1848 - by contrast with 1830, as well as 1789 and 1776, and the Dutch Revolt and English civil war of the 17th century. The bourgeoisie's 'ruling' character was not a legal-constitutional system of government descended from the 17th century political and social revolutions in Holland and England so much as it was a form of civil society: a revolutionary system of bourgeois social relations that was supposed to subordinate the

state. What requires explanation is the 19th century slipping of the state from adequate social control, and its 'rising above' the contending political groups and social classes, as a power in itself. Even if Bonapartism in Marx's late 19th century sense was the expression of a potential inherent in the forms of bourgeois politics emerging much earlier, there is still the question of why it was not realised so until after 1848. There is also the matter of why Marx characterised Louis Napoleon as a "lesser" and "farical" phenomenon of post-1848 history by contrast with Napoleon Bonaparte's "tragedy" in the Great Revolution.<sup>3</sup> It was not the mere fact of repetition, but *why* and *how* history "repeated itself" - and repeated with a *difference*.

This was, according to Marx, the essential condition for politics after 1848 - the condition for political parties in capitalism. That condition was not only or primarily a matter of politics due to constitutional legal forms of bourgeois property and its social relations, but rather was for Marx the expression of the crisis of those forms as a function of the industrial revolution. There was for Marx an important contradiction between the democratic revolution and the proletarianisation of society in capitalism.

Macnair addresses this by specifying the 'proletariat' as all those in society "dependent on the total wage fund" - as opposed to those (presumably) dependent upon 'capital'. This is clearly not a matter of economics, because distinguishing between those depending on wages as opposed to capital is a political matter of differentiation: all the intermediate strata depending on both the wage fund and capital would need to be compelled to take sides in any political dispute between the prerogatives of wages versus capital. Macnair

addresses this through the struggle for democracy. But this does not pursue the contradiction far enough. For the wage fund, according to Marx, is a form of capital: it is 'variable' as opposed to 'constant capital'. So the proletarianisation of society, according to Marx, is not addressed adequately as a matter of the condition of labour, but rather the social dependence on and domination by capital. And capital for Marx is not synonymous with the private property in the means of production belonging to the capitalists, but rather the relation of wages, or the resources for the reproduction of labour-power (including the 'means of consumption'), to society as a whole. This is what makes it a *political* matter - a matter of politics in *society* - rather than merely the struggle of one group against another.

Macnair characterises the theory of Marxism specifically as one that recognises the necessity of those dependent upon the wage fund *per se* to overcome capitalism; he characterises the struggle for this as the struggle for democracy, with the adequate horizon of this as "communism" at a global scale - as opposed to "socialism", which may be confined to the internal politics of individual nation-states. Macnair points out that the working class is necessarily in the "vanguard" of such struggle for adequate social democratisation, insofar as it comes up against the condition of capitalism *negatively*, as a *problem* to be overcome. The working class is thus defined "negatively" with respect to the social conditions to be overcome, rather than "positively" according to its activity, its concrete labour in society. The goal is to change the conditions for political participation, as well as economic activity, in society.

## Class and history

Conventionally, Marxists have distinguished among political parties on their 'class basis', regarding various parties as 'representing' different class groups: 'bourgeois', 'petty bourgeois' and 'proletarian'. This is complicated by classic characterisations such as that by Lenin of the UK Labour Party as a "bourgeois workers' party". Furthermore, there has been the bedeviling question of what is included in the 'petty bourgeoisie'. But Marxists (such as Lenin) did not define politics 'sociologically', but rather *historically*: as representing not the interests of members of various groups, but rather different 'ideological' horizons of politics and for the transformation of society.

So, for instance, what made the Socialist Revolutionaries in the Russian Revolution of 1917 'represent' the peasants was not so much their positions on agrarian matters as the 'petty bourgeois' horizon of politics they shared with the peasants as petty proprietors. SRs were not necessarily themselves petty proprietors - they were like Lenin 'petty bourgeois intellectuals' - but rather had in common with the peasants a form of *discontent* with capitalism, but one 'ideologically' hemmed in by what Marxism regarded a limited horizon.

In Marx's (in)famous phrase from *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, the peasants as a group, as a 'petty bourgeois' "sack of potatoes" of smallholders, could not "represent themselves", but must

rather "be represented" - as they were, according to Marx, by Louis Bonaparte's Second Empire's succeeding the counterrevolutionary Party of Order in 1848.<sup>4</sup> Marx called attention to the issue of *how* representation functioned in the politics of capitalism. Likewise, "bourgeois" parties were not pro-capitalist as much as they sought to manage the problems of capitalism from a certain historical perspective: that of 'capital'. This was the horizon of their politics; whereas 'petty bourgeois' parties were concerned with the perspective of smaller property holdings; and 'workers' parties' that of wage-labour. To be a 'bourgeois workers' party', such as Labour in the UK, meant to represent the horizon of wage-labour in terms compatible with (especially, but not exclusively, UK 'national') capital. This was the character of ideology and political action - 'consciousness' - which was not reducible to, let alone determined by, economic interest of a particular concrete social group.

So various political parties, as well as different political forms, represented different *historical* horizons for discontents within capitalism. For Marxists, only 'proletarian socialist' politics could represent adequately the *problem* - the crisis and contradiction - of capitalism. Others ideologically obscured it. A 'bourgeois workers' party' would be a phenomenon of 'Bonapartism', insofar as 'nature abhors a vacuum' and it filled the space evacuated by the failure of bourgeois politics, while also falling short of the true historical horizon of the political tasks of proletarian socialism. It was a phenomenon of the contradiction of *capitalism* in a particular way - as were *all* political parties from a Marxist perspective.

There are great merits and significant clarity to Macnair's approach to the problem of politics in capitalism and what it would require to transcend this. The issue, though, is his taking as a norm the parliamentary system of government in the European mode and thus neglecting the US constitutional system. For at issue is the potential disparity and antagonism between legislative and executive authority, or between the law and its enforcement. The American system of 'checks and balances' was meant to uphold liberal democracy and prevent the tyranny of either the executive or the legislature (or the judicial) aspects of government. There is an important domain of political struggle already, between executive and legislative authority, and this would affect any struggle to transform politics. The question is the source of this antagonism. It is not merely formal. If the 'separation of powers' in the US constitutional system has served undemocratic ends, it is not essentially because it was *intended* to do so. The problem of adequate and proper democratic authority in society is not reducible to the issue of purported 'mob rule'. Any form of government could be perverted to serve capitalism. So the issue is indeed one of *politics* as such - the social content of or what informs any form of political authority.

## 'Party of the new type?'

Macnair notes potential deficits and inadequacies in the Third (Communist) International's endorsement of 'soviet' or 'workers' council' government,

with its attempt to overcome the difference between legislative and executive authority, which seems to reproduce the problem Macnair finds in parliamentary government. For him, executive authority eludes responsibility in the same way that capitalist private property eludes the law constitutionally.

This is the source of Macnair's conflation of liberalism and Bonapartism, as if the problem of capitalism merely played out in terms of liberalism rather than contradicting it. Liberal democracy should not be conceived as the constitutional limit on democracy demanded by capitalist private property. The "democratic republic" Macnair calls for by contrast should not be conceived as the opposite of liberal democracy. For capitalism does not only contradict the democratic republic, but also liberal democracy, leading to Bonapartism, or *illiberal* democracy.

Dick Howard, in *The specter of democracy* has usefully investigated Marx's original formulations on the problem of politics and capitalism, tracing these back to the origins of modern democracy in the American and French Revolutions of the 18th century and specifying the problem in common between (American) "republican democracy" and (French) "democratic republicanism".<sup>5</sup> Howard finds in both antinomical forms of modern democracy the danger of "anti-politics", or of society eluding adequate political expression and direction, to which either democratic authority or liberalism can lead. Howard looks to Marx as a specifically political thinker on this problem to suggest the direction that struggle against it must take. Socialism for Marx, in Howard's view, would fulfil the potential that has been otherwise limited by both republican democracy and democratic republicanism - or by both liberalism and socialism.

Macnair equates communism with democratic republicanism and thus treats it as a goal to be achieved and a norm to be realised. Moreover, he thinks that this goal can only be achieved by the practice of democratic republicanism in the present: the political party for communism must exemplify democratic republicanism in practice, as an alternative to the politics of the "party-state" in capitalism.

Marx, by contrast, addressed communism as merely the "next step" and a "one-sided negation" of capitalism rather than as the end goal of emancipation: it is not the opposite of capitalism in the sense of an undialectical antithesis, but rather an expression of it. Indeed, for Marx, communism would be the completion and fulfilment of capitalism, and not in terms of one or some aspects over others, but rather in and through its central self-contradiction, which is political as well as economic, or 'political-economic'.

What this requires is recognising the non-identity of various aspects of capitalism as bound up in and part and parcel of the process of capitalism's potential transformation into communism. For example, the non-identity of law (as legislated), its (judicial) interpretation, and (executive) enforcement, or the non-identity of civil society and the state, as expressed by the specific phenomenon of modern political parties. States are compulsory; political parties are voluntary, civil-society formations. And governments are not identical with legislatures. Politics as conditioned by capitalism could provide the *means*, but cannot already embody the *ends*, of transforming capitalism through communism. If communism is to be pursued, as Macnair argues, by the means of democratic republicanism, then we must recognise what has become of the democratic revolution in capitalism. It has not been merely

corrupted and degraded, but rather rendered self-contradictory, which is a different matter. The concrete manifestations of democracy in capitalism are not only opportunist compromises, but also struggles to assert *politics*.

## Symptomatic socialism

The history of the movement for socialism or communism generally and of Marxism in particular demonstrates the problem of capitalism through symptomatic phenomena of attempts to overcome it. This is not a history of trials and errors, but rather of discontents and exemplary forms of politics, borne of the crisis of capitalism, as it has been experienced through various phases, none of which have been superseded entirely.

Lenin and Trotsky were careful to avoid, as Trotsky put it, in *The lesson of October* (1924), the "fetishism" of the soviet or workers' council form of politics and (revolutionary) government. Rather, Marxists addressed this as an emergent phenomenon of a specific phase of history, one which they sought to advance through the proletarian socialist revolution. But, according to Lenin, in *'Leftwing' communism: an infantile disorder*, the soviet form did not mean that preceding historical forms of politics - for instance, parliaments and trade unions - had been superseded in terms of being left behind. Indeed, it was precisely the failure of the world proletarian socialist - communist - revolution of 1917-19 that necessitated a "retreat" and reconsideration of perspectives and political prognoses. Certain forms and arenas of political struggle had come and gone. But, according to Lenin and Trotsky, the political *party* for communism remained indispensable. What did they mean by this?

Lenin and Trotsky meant something other than what Rosa Luxemburg's biographer, JP Nettl, called the "inheritor party" or "state within the state" exemplified by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) as the flagship party of the Second International.<sup>6</sup> The social democratic party was not intended by Luxemburg, Lenin or Trotsky to be the democratic republican alternative to capitalism. They did not aim to replace one constitutional party-state with another. Or at least they did not intend so beyond the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', which was meant to rapidly transition out of capitalism to socialism. Beyond that, a qualitative development was envisioned, beyond 'bourgeois right' and its forms of social relations - and of politics. 'Communism' remained the essential horizon of potential transformation.

One key distinction that Macnair elides in his account is the development of bourgeois social relations within pre-bourgeois civilisation that will not be replicated by the struggle for socialism: socialism does not develop within capitalism so much as the proletariat represents the potential negation of bourgeois social relations that has developed within capitalism. The proletariat is a phenomenon of crisis in the existing society, not the exemplar of the new society. Socialism is not meant to be a proletarian society, but rather its overcoming. Capitalism is already a proletarianised society. Hence, Bonapartism as the manifestation of the need for the proletariat to rule politically that has been abandoned by the bourgeoisie. Bonapartism is not a form of politics, but rather an indication of the *failure of politics*. Marxism investigates that failure and its historical significance. The dictatorship of the proletariat will be the 'highest' and most acute form of Bonapartism, but one that intends to immediately begin to overcome itself, or 'wither away'.

The proletariat aims to abolish itself as a class not simply by abolishing the capitalist class as its complementary opposite expression of the self-contradiction and crisis of capitalism. This is why Marx recognised the persistence of 'bourgeois right' in any 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and down into the transition to socialism in its 'first stage'. Bourgeois right would overcome itself through its crisis and self-contradiction, which the dictatorship of the proletariat would 'advance' and not immediately transcend. The dictatorship of the proletariat or '(social) democratic republic' would be the form in which the struggle to overcome capitalism would first be able to take place politically.

Macnair confuses the proletariat's struggle for self-abolition in socialism with the bourgeois - that is, modern urban plebeian - struggle for the democratic republic. He ignores the self-contradiction of this struggle in capitalism: that capitalism has reproduced itself in and through crisis, and indeed through revolution, through a process of "creative destruction" (Schumpeter), in which the bourgeois revolution has re-posed itself, but resulting in the re-proletarianisation of society: the reconstitution of wage labour under changed concrete conditions. This has taken place not only or perhaps even primarily through economic or political-economic crises and struggles, but through specifically *political* crises and struggles, through the recurrence of the democratic revolution. The proletariat cannot either make society in the image of itself or abolish itself immediately. It can only seek to lead the democratic revolution - hopefully - beyond itself.

## Liberalism and socialism

The problem with liberal democracy is that it proceeds as if the democratic revolution has been achieved already, and ignores that capitalism has undermined it. Capitalism makes the democratic revolution both necessary and impossible, in that the democratic revolution constitutes bourgeois social relations - the relations of the exchange of labour - but capitalism undermines those social relations. The democratic revolution reproduces not 'capitalism' as some stable system (which, by Marx's definition, it cannot be), but rather the *crisis* of bourgeois society in capitalism, in a *political*, and hence in a potentially *conscious*, way. The democratic revolution reconstitutes the crisis of capitalism in a manifestly political way, and this is why it can possibly point beyond it, if it is recognised as such: if the struggle for democracy is recognised properly as a manifestation of the crisis of capitalism and hence the need to go beyond bourgeois social relations, to go beyond democracy. Bourgeois forms of politics will be overcome through advancing them to their limits - in crisis.

The crisis of capitalism means that the forms of bourgeois politics are differentiated: they express the crisis and disintegration of bourgeois social relations. They also manifest the accumulation of past attempts at mediating bourgeois social relations in and through the crisis of capitalism. This is why the formal problems of politics will not go away, even if they are transformed. The issue is one of recognising this historical accumulation of political problems in capitalism, and of grasping adequately how these forms are symptomatic of the development - or lack thereof - of the politics of the struggle for socialism in and through these forms. For example, Occupy, which took place after the writing of Macnair's book, clearly is not an advance in politically effective form. But it is symptomatic of our present historical moment, and so must be grappled with as such. It must be

grasped as an endemic phenomenon, a 'necessary form of appearance' of the problem of capitalism in the present, and not treated merely as an accidental and hence avoidable error.

Macnair's preferred target of critical investigation is the 'mass strike' and related 'workers' council' or 'soviet' form. But this did not exist in isolation: its limits were not its own, but rather also an expression of the limits of labour unions and parliamentary government as well as of political parties in the early 20th century. For Macnair the early Third or Communist International becomes a blind alley, proven by its failure. But its problems cannot be thus settled and resolved so summarily or as easily as that.

If Occupy has failed it has done so without manifesting the political problem of capitalism as acutely as the soviet or workers' council form of revolutionary politics did circa 1917, precisely because Occupy did not manifest, as the soviets did, a crisis of parliamentary democracy, labour union organisation and political party formation, as the workers' council form did in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the German revolution of 1918-19 and the Hungarian revolution of 1919, as well as the crisis in Italy beginning in 1919, and elsewhere in that historical moment and subsequently (eg, in the British General Strike of 1926 and the Chinese revolution of 1927). Indeed, Occupy might be regarded as an attempt to *avoid* certain problems, through what post-new leftists such as Alain Badiou have affirmed as "politics at a distance from the state", that nonetheless imposed themselves, and with a vengeance - see Egypt as the highest expression of the 'Arab spring'. Occupy evinced a mixture of liberal and anarchist discontents - a mixture of labour union and 'direct democracy' popular-assembly politics. The problem of 20th century Third (and Fourth) International politics, regarding contemporaneous and inherited forms of the mass strike (and its councils), labour unions and political parties, expressed the interrelated problems accumulated from different prior historical moments of the preceding 19th century (in 1830, 1848 and 1871, etc), all of which needed to be worked through and within, together, along with the fundamental bourgeois political form of (the struggle for) the democratic republic - which Kant among others (liberals) already recognised in the 18th century as an issue of a necessary 'world state' (or at least a world 'system of states') - not achievable within national confines.

## Redeeming history

Political forms are sustained practices; they are embodied history. Because none of the forms emerging in the capitalist era - since the early to mid-19th century - has existed without the others, they must all be considered together, as mediating (the crisis of) capitalism at various levels, rather than in opposition to one another. Furthermore, these forms do not merely instantiate the bourgeois society that must be overcome - in a reified view - but rather mediate its crisis in capitalism, and inevitably so.

History cannot be regarded as a catalogue of errors to be avoided, but must be regarded, however critically, as a resource informing the present, whether or not adequately consciously. If past historical problems repeat themselves, they do not do so literally but with a difference. The question is the significance of that difference. It cannot be regarded as itself progressive. Indeed the difference often expresses the degradation of a problem. One cannot avoid either the repetition or the difference in capitalist history. An adequate 'proletarian socialist' party would immediately

push beyond prior historical limits. That is how it could both manifest and advance the contradiction in capitalism.

History, according to Adorno (following Benjamin), is the "demand for redemption". This is because history is not an accumulation of facts, but rather a form of past action continuing in the present. Historical action was transformative and is again to be transformed in the present: we transform past action through continuing to act on it in the present. No past action continues untransformed. The question is the (re)direction and continuing transformation of that action. Thinking is a way, too, of transforming past action.

Political party is not a dead form, but rather lives in ways dependent at least in part on how we think of it. The need for political party for the left today is a demand to redeem past action in the present. We can do so more or less well, and not only as a function of quantity, but also of quality. Can we receive the task of past politics revealed by Marxism as it is ramified down to the present? Can the left sustain its action in time; can it be a form of *politics*?

Marxism never offered a wholly new or distinct form of political action, but only sought to affect - consciously - forms of politics already underway. Examples of this include: Chartism; labour unions (whether according to trade or industry); Lassalle's political party of the 'permanent campaign of the working class'; the Paris Commune; the 'mass' or 'general strike'; and 'workers' councils'. But not only these: also, the parliament or congress, as well as the sovereign executive with prerogative. These are all descended to us as forms not merely of political action and political struggle over that action, but also and especially of *revolution*, revolutionary change in society in the modern, bourgeois epoch.

One thing is certain regarding the history of the 19th and 20th centuries as legacy, now in the 21st century: since the politics of the state has not gone away, neither has the question of political party. We must accept forms of revolutionary politics as they have come down to us historically. But that does not mean inheriting the forms of state and party as given, but rather transforming them - in revolution. Capitalism is a social crisis that calls forth political action. The only questions are how and why - with what consciousness and with what goal?

If social and political crisis - revolution - has up to now given us only more capitalism, then we need to accept that - and think of how communism could be the result of revolutionary politics in capitalism. Again, as Marx and the best Marxism once did, we need to accept the task of *redeeming* history.

The difference Macnair observes, between the political party formations of the early original bourgeois era of the 17th and 18th centuries and in the crisis of capitalism manifesting circa 1848 (including prior Chartism in Britain), is key to the fundamental political question of Marxism, as well as of proletarian socialism more broadly (for instance in anarcho-syndicalism) - as symptoms of *history*. There is not a static problem, but rather a dynamic of the historical process that is moreover regressive in its repetition in difference. Marxism once sought to be conscious of the difference, and so should we ●

## Notes

1. 'The philosophy trap' *Weekly Worker* November 21 2013.
2. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/18th-Brumaire.pdf](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/18th-Brumaire.pdf).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. D Howard *The specter of democracy* New York 2002.
6. JP Nettl, 'The SPD 1890-1914 as political model', 1965.

## LETTERS



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

## Fighting

Very recently I was elected by the students at the University of Birmingham to serve as a first-year guild councillor for the University's guild of students. Unlike most left candidates in student elections, I refused to adopt a reformist agenda. As a Leninist, I perceive elections to be first and foremost an opportunity to agitate people's consciousness. I, along with comrades in Communist Students, was adamant that I wasn't interested in putting forward 'respectable' and 'reasonable' policies in order to narrowly scrape a position onto the guild bureaucracy; I wanted to put forward policies that would make people think.

In my campaign materials I openly declared myself a Marxist and a member of Communist Students; despite the fact various people on the soft left encouraged me to drop such labels, as they thought it could cost me the election. I also refused to alter two of my key policies - the advocacy of freedom of speech/association on campus and the campaign for a more democratic guild. I was told that talking about reforming guild structures, so that the board of trustees (a body which is unelected, which can overturn decisions made by the guild, and whose members are mostly non-students) is either abolished or elected, was a 'hard sell'; ergo I shouldn't mention it to students, as they'd find it 'boring'. On the contrary, I found that most students were aghast at the fact Birmingham is the only university in the Russell Group to have a body, made up of university management, which can overturn democratically agreed student decisions.

My advocacy of the freedom of speech/association on campus caused a lot of ambivalence amongst various lefties. Some comrades took it upon themselves to commend me for standing up for this, and for actively voicing my opposition to the suspensions imposed on students who took part in an occupation last year, whilst helpfully reminding me that my policy could be *misinterpreted* as advocating the freedom for unsavoury groups, such as the 'rape apologist' SWP or the 'racist' Young Independence, to organise on campus; or as advocating a deviation from 'safe spaces' (freedom of speech could lead to someone getting offended). It is scary that such Stalinist ways of thinking passes for common sense on the left nowadays, but that is where decades of defeats and demoralisation have led the movement. Many comrades have lost confidence in their politics; they don't believe they can win people over through debate.

Unfortunately, guild electoral regulations mean candidates cannot be endorsed by an organisation, as that could provide them with an "unfair advantage over other candidates". Such rules undeniably hindered the type of campaign I was trying to run, making the process much more individualised. As a lone communist, I obviously accepted help from friends, including people in the Green Party and Left Unity. Whilst I greatly appreciated their assistance, I think it is fair to say that, when they were arguing for free education, a lot of 'We can afford it', 'Germany reversed their tuition fees' and other such reformism came out their mouths. So, whilst I tried to avoid a reformist agenda, I think the campaign inevitably drifted into centrism from time to time.

Had I been allowed to be officially endorsed by CS, then perhaps things would have worked out differently. I also think that, had CS been in a stronger position, and had the guild allowed non-students to campaign for me, we could have drafted in volunteers from outside

Birmingham who were on the same ideological page to help out with the canvassing and thus make the campaign message more coherent.

Ultimately, the campaign was a success. Two first-year councillors were elected: the candidate who secured the first position was from the Jewish Society and polled 190 votes (45%), I won the second position with 140 votes (33%), the candidate from Labour Students got 90 votes (21%), while 'Reopen nominations' polled 11 votes (3%). I'm not going to claim that all 140 people who voted for me have been won over to the ideas of communism. Indeed, many did so because they knew me, they were vaguely left, or because I was the only candidate they saw campaigning. In fact, the overwhelming majority of students didn't vote at all; the election for first year guild councillors only attracted a paltry 1.3% turnout.

Despite these qualifications, the campaign did draw some serious people out of the woodwork. A batch of students did express their support for the ideas of Marxism and hopefully I can continue to have a dialogue with them now the election battle is over.

By the time you read this letter, I'll have already taken my seat as a guild councillor. I'll have also just moved a motion of censure against all the sabbatical officers, at my first meeting, for deciding to cancel guild-subsidised coaches to the upcoming free education demonstration in London, because it ostensibly breaches the National Union of Students 'safer spaces' policy.

**Robert Eagleton**  
Birmingham

## Percentage

While I thought Eddie Ford's description of Ed Miliband's difficulties was useful and interesting ('The coup that never was', November 13), I think he missed the central reason why Miliband and Labour are in such dire straits: namely, the disastrous and deeply unambitious '35% strategy' - ie, the notion that a majority Labour government might scrape in with just 35% of the vote.

When the Labour Party was founded in the early 20th century, its supporters believed that in the end virtually all working people, the large majority of the population, would come to vote for their party. From its beginning, Labour's vote grew dramatically. Originally, Labour was class-based. Britain was a society divided into two distinct classes with irreconcilable economic and social interests. In the conflict between these two classes, Labour represented workers by hand and by brain, while the Conservatives represented the property-owning class. The role of the Labour Party was to represent and serve the interests of the working class and to challenge the power and sway of the other. This vision and strategy was dramatically successful, displacing one of the two capitalist parties, the Liberals, and brought rising membership and votes right up to 1951.

In today's Britain, the core working class still accounts for over half the working population. Including all those who are dependent on a wage, salary or benefit, the broad working class represents around 75% of the total population. Labour's founders would have aimed to win the electoral support of at least 60% of the modern electorate, and were once well on the way to achieving that. Modern Labour's 'ambitions' are pathetic and pitiable in comparison.

The '35% strategy' in a funny way follows Tony Blair's 'triangulation' policies - ie, the assumption you can take your core vote for granted, because there is nowhere for them to go. The only difference is that, while Blair shat on those core voters to demonstrate his capitalist credentials to Rupert Murdoch, Miliband makes minor, timid, tepid, limp policy attempts to appeal to them, while

hoping the electoral system will produce an arithmetic majority in parliament.

A Labour government 'elected' by just 35% of the vote - a fifth of the electorate - would have no democratic mandate, let alone the organised mass backing which will be necessary, to implement any real reforms in the interests of working people.

Andrew Murray, in his polemic with Left Unity, was right to say that in 2010 Ed Miliband was the most credible leadership candidate on offer. It was excellent he won the support of a majority of trade unionists in the electoral college. It would have been better if he had won a majority of individual members as well. It was obvious leadership had come very early for him and he was far from the finished article. But we were optimistic he could grow into the role, build a strong team around him and develop strong relationships with progressive, organised labour.

It is clear now that Miliband is no calibre leader of any description, certainly no working class one. He is clearly intelligent, serious and compassionate, and would perhaps be at his best behind the scenes assembling the best possible team and thinking out strategy and policy. Coupling a 35% strategy with an electoral campaign based on his personality and 'appeal' is going to be a double disaster.

Two years into the job should have been enough for him to grow into the role, but in 2012 we had the utterly nonsensical and ridiculous notion of 'one-nation Labour'. A silly, student prankish attempt to appropriate a phrase invented by a Tory prime minister for his own purposes. Ed Miliband is no Disraeli and clearly learned no Marxism from his father.

Murray was wrong in asserting there is no electoral space to the left of Labour. Working class people and working class communities have rejected patronising, arrogant Blairite 'triangulation' by either voting for other parties, not voting at all or even dropping off the electoral register altogether. Labour's core vote is today haemorrhaging to the Scottish National Party, the UK Independence Party and the Greens. At the moment, even 35% would seem to be unachievable.

Modern Labour should be aiming literally to double its electoral support, and developing policies, organisations and relationships purely and simply with that aim. Labour can only win by once again becoming the political party of the working class, a working class with very different needs and indeed opposite aims to those of the establishment and the ruling class.

This clearly cannot be achieved in a few months or even a few years. But we need to aim big, and to win big and irreversibly. It may take five, 10 or 20 years, but who cares, if when we do win we genuinely do bring about the 'end of history'? That is the 'long war' we need to conduct.

**Andrew Northall**  
Kettering

## Thank god

Eddie Ford's article on Miliband's electoral future misses a crucial factor when he looked at voting polls. Labour is due to be wiped out in Scotland in the next election. 'Yes' voters are quite consciously preparing a campaign which will aim to render them as rare as Tory MPs, by voting SNP and Green. This, if effective, will reduce even further the chance of Labour producing enough MPs to form a government.

I must say that Nicola Sturgeon, the newly elected leader of the SNP, is shot through with hypocrisy and double standards. Don't misunderstand me - I would have voted 'yes' in the referendum and believe in Scottish independence. But the principle that Scotland must be allowed self-determination and a voice is completely undermined by Nicola Sturgeon's public statements that she

doesn't believe there should be an EU referendum. That the British public should not be allowed a vote to decide in or out of the EU after banging on for decades about the right of a similar referendum on in or out of the UK.

Her public desire to forge a coalition with a minority Labour government is in main part to prevent a UK referendum on the EU. Apart from the glaring hypocrisy and double standards, she misses entirely the point that many 'no' voters who would have otherwise voted 'yes' did so because the SNP had ruled out a Scottish referendum on EU membership had they won. She aims to deny the voice of not only the folk south of the border, but Scottish people too on this subject.

Ee, thank god these members of the political ruling class are around to tell us what our best interests are and to stay our hands and voices when we foolishly seek to decide things for ourselves.

**David Douglass**  
South Shields

## Fence-sitters

Stan Keable's article, 'Threat of witch-hunt averted' (November 13), correctly welcomed the withdrawal of the witch-hunting part of the national committee statement at the Labour Representation Committee annual general meeting. The bit of the statement that took my fancy was the last paragraph, which proclaimed: "Anyone may advocate a course of action and seek the approval or cooperation of the LRC through the appropriate forum [can't get more democratic than that!]. If such action is not agreed, members are expected to refrain from continuing to advocate a course of action unless there is a material change of circumstances."

Unless "material change of circumstances" means simply 'tomorrow', we can see that the Russian Revolution would never have got off the ground because only Trotsky and Shliapnikov agreed with the *April theses* initially. So under the watchful eye of the troika of Andrew Berry, Valerie Graham and Simon Deville, Lenin would have to shut up about all that 'All power to the soviets' stuff until "a material change of circumstances" - Kornilov's attempted coup? - released him from his silence, by which time that other politically similar troika, Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev, would have ended all hope of rallying the masses for the second revolution by their support for the war and the provisional government of Kerensky.

Which brings me to the big problem with Stan's account: war, or rather the war against the Russian speakers of the Donbass. Advocating work within the "mass organisations of the working class" - the trade unions and the Labour Party - Leon Trotsky wrote: "A revolutionary group ... can work most effectively at present by opposition to social patriots within the mass organisations. In view of the increasing acuteness of the international situation, it is absolutely essential to be within the mass organisations, while there is the possibility of doing revolutionary work within them."

This was the central political issue at the LRC AGM and Stan cannot bring himself even to mention it. Stan's Labour Party Marxists proposed a wrecking amendment to the Brent and Harrow LRC motion, which advocated affiliation to the Solidarity with the Anti-fascist Resistance in Ukraine (SARU), to delete all except the bit that proposed disaffiliation from Chris Ford's pro-Maidan Ukraine Solidarity Campaign. So on the subject of the looming World War III the CPGB are neutral - a stance they confirmed the following week at the Left Unity conference by backing the Lewisham motion (which denounces the Kiev far-right regime and supports self-rule for Donbass), but not the amendment to

it that proposes affiliation to SARU. Despite supporting self-rule, they won't back the people fighting for it (as Richard Brenner reported on Facebook).

So we are back to 1914 in many ways; once again imperialism is beating the drums of war and Russophobia is everywhere - far more in the LRC than in the LU, of course, which is why the CPGB took a 'firmer' stance against the opponents of social-patriotism there than in Left Unity.

Maciej Zurowski speaks up for the CPGB on Facebook and takes a very orthodox-seeming line to cover this capitulation to social-patriotism: "I cannot think of many terms in the history of the workers' movement more obfuscatory and corrupt than 'anti-fascism'. True to tradition, Solidarity for the Anti-Fascist Resistance in the Ukraine employs it in a way that conceals more than it says about the politics on the ground. We support the right to self-determination of the various regions in the Ukraine, but we won't idealise competing nationalist factions or sow illusions in their political character."

Indeed, Zuri: the old Stalinist, popular-frontist hiding of the class lines is visible from some within the SARU and must be fought. But even more appalling are the capitulators to social-patriots on the leadership on the LRC and in the Socialist Resistance leaders of Left Unity. And they got a big boost on November 16, when Ukrainian nationalists commemorated their dead of 'all wars', including Nazi collaborators who murdered Jews, Russians and Poles in World War II, by laying a wreath at the Cenotaph. SARU managed a silent counterdemonstration, which carried a placard saying: "Remember the victims of Ukrainian Nazism - past and present". Around 60-70 attended.

Revolutionary socialists know what a united front is and what a popular front is, and we are in no doubt that SARU is the forum to fight for the politics of the socialist revolution in preparation for the momentous events that are now unfolding in Ukraine and the Middle East. The CPGB are fence-sitting.

**Gerry Downing**  
Socialist Fight

## Dangerous

I would like to respond to the letter (October 23) regarding my article on 'Democratic revolution and the contradiction of capital' (October 16), critiquing Mike Macnair's *Revolutionary strategy* (2008), and specify the issue of the proletariat as alleged "passive victim of history". The Frankfurt School of the 1930s recognised that the two historic constituencies of revolutionary politics, the masses and the party, had failed: the masses had led to fascism; and the party had led to Stalinism.

Trotsky had remarked, in his *History of the Russian Revolution* (1930), on the "interference of the masses in historical events": "... whether this is good or bad we leave to the judgment of moralists". But, as Lenin had written in *What is to be done?* (1902), this was not a spontaneous development, but rather such apparent 'spontaneity' could be explained by the prior history of the workers' movement for socialism. The Russian Revolution had broken out on International Women's Day, a working class holiday invented by Marxists in the socialist parties of the Second International.

Trotsky wrote, in 'Stalinism and Bolshevism' (1937), that Bolshevism was "only a political tendency closely fused with the working class, but not identical with it" and had "never identified itself with either the October revolution or the Soviet state that issued from it". So what was political party for Marxists such as Trotsky, Lenin

and Luxemburg? It was one part of a differentiated whole of society and its political struggles, a political form that allowed for conscious participation in all the variety of arenas for politics that had developed in capitalism: parliaments, labour unions, mass strikes and their councils, and popular assemblies, including workers' councils for revolutionary governance. However, as a political form - as Andrew Feenberg has pointed out in *The philosophy of praxis* (2014), about Lukács' account of the articulation of theory and practice in Bolshevism in *History and class consciousness* and related writings - the party was not only or even especially a subject, but also and, perhaps most importantly, an object of political action. It fell to Trotsky, in the aftermath of the failure of Bolshevism, to attempt to sustain this Marxist concept of political form, against Stalinism's liquidation of politics in the USSR and in the international communist movement.

In this, Trotsky followed Lenin and Luxemburg, as well as Marx and Engels. Trotsky followed Marx in regarding both Stalinism and fascism as forms of the Bonapartist state. The death of the left as a political force is signalled by its shying away from and anathematising the political party for social transformation - revolution - not only in anarchism and left communist notions of politics without parties, but most of all in the long and pervasive, if largely unrecognised, Stalinist inheritance that justifies the party only by identifying it with the people, which puts an end to politics, including political consciousness. What Dick Howard, following Marx, means, when he warns of the 'anti-political' crisis of politics in capitalism expressed by Bonapartism, is this unmediated identification of politics with society, whether through the subordination of society or the liquidation of the party in the state - all in the name of quieting the inherent instability of politics, which society in its crisis of capitalism cannot afford.

For, as Marx recognised in the aftermath of failed revolution in 1848, Bonapartism was not only undemocratic liberalism, unbridled capitalism without political accountability to society, but was also the state run amok, dominating society, and with a great deal of popular support - for instance by what Marx called the 'lumpenproletariat'; an example of the reduction of society to a politically undifferentiated mass, the very opposite of what Marx considered the necessary 'class-consciousness' of the proletariat. This is why Trotsky rightly regarded Stalinism as the antithesis of Bolshevism.

Stalinism's suppression of politics in the Marxist sense was not only undemocratic, but also popular, both in the USSR and internationally. It was borne of the same social and thus political crisis in capitalism. Stalinism was not the cause, but was an effect, of the failure of politics in capitalism. We still need to try to overcome this problem of capitalism by constituting it through the inherently dangerous game of party politics.

**Chris Cutrone**  
email

## Communalists

The ethno-chauvinist ideology often purveyed by Jewish comrades is again on display when Moshé Machover (Letters, November 13) repeats the communalists' tortured argument: we are uniquely qualified to prove Israel doesn't speak for all the Jews! ('White folks against the KKK', anyone?)

That this ethno-chauvinism has been allowed to fester - covered for rather than exposed by official anti-racism - permits the flourishing of the thinnest of veneers. Who, in actual reality, would think possible that Israel speaks for Jews without exception?

These communalists pretend they perform internationalist service by proving (how wonderful!) that a few

Jews don't support Israel uncritically. Anyone not blinded by Jewish ethno-chauvinism sees that what they actually try to assert is that their beliefs are terribly important because they're Jews.

That this licence is claimed based on Israeli boasts substantiates the symbiosis between left communalism and Zionism. The main function of Israeli leftists is to prove that Israel is a 'free country', which 'tolerates dissent' - unlike the loathsome Arab states.

**Stephen Diamond**  
USA

## Unproven group

Pete McLaren sets out very well the problem with free schools (Letters, November 13). Much of what he says can be found on the National Union of Teachers website ([www.teachers.org](http://www.teachers.org)) under 'Edufacts'. But it is worth developing his last bullet point with a local example from Waltham Forest.

It is even worse than Pete states in some cases. A local trust called Lion Academy, who have three primary schools in the borough, now want to set up a secondary free school in 2016 for 1,400 secondary-age students. This outfit have no experience at all of running secondary schools and their record at primary level is questionable. This has not stopped their application, because they see this as a business opportunity, pure and simple.

Any reasonable application would assess the geographical need for places and look for sites. This could mean two schools in different parts of the borough, for example. Not this lot! They want the biggest possible school on any site, no matter what chaos this could cause other schools locally. They don't care where their business is done, as long as they can make money. We have heard of one site they are looking at, no more than 50 yards from an existing secondary school, and another at the far end of the borough.

Their arrogance knows no bounds. They are asking parents at their primary schools to sign up to their new secondary school. They already have the largest primary in the country and it seems their desire to build a school for 1,400 is based on the number of students they teach in their existing schools. The existing primary schools have a very high turnover of staff, with no NUT reps. They have a highly questionable management structure with excessively high wages for those at the top.

The local authority in Waltham Forest has told Lion Academy Trust that they have no support. The head teachers are up in arms at the disparaging public remarks LAT have made about other local schools and the unions are furious. It will be interesting to see if, despite these forces against them, the department for education still allow this totally unproven group to run schools in Waltham Forest.

**Steve White**  
email

## Microcosm

I would like to comment on a *Daily Mail* front-page story, which asked: "Is there no-one left in Britain who can make a sandwich?"

The Greencore company has apparently travelled to Hungary to recruit 300 people to work in its Northampton sandwich-making factory, which already employs 1,100 workers. This news has sparked howls of protest in a town where 7,800 people are in receipt of job seekers' allowance.

Greencore started out as the privatised Irish Sugar Company and has expanded into food processing, including sandwich-making for Marks and Spencer, Waitrose, Sainsbury's and Asda. In the UK and Ireland it has a turnover of £25 million a week.

The story is a microcosm of what is happening across the UK. A closer look at the facts says a lot. Most workers in the factory are on the minimum wage of £6.50 an hour and are supplied via

an employment agency. 'Cold money' payments of 26p an hour only kick in once a worker has passed a three-month probationary period. The jobs involve shift work and only one day a week's work is guaranteed. With rents and mortgages to pay, no wonder very few of the 7,800 people on JSA in Northampton have considered applying for jobs at the factory.

The *Daily Mail* story shows the need for Unite the union to fight for a national minimum wage of £12 an hour; the abolition of employment agencies; a guaranteed 35-hour week; trade union control over hiring and firing; and the opening of the books of Greencore to inspection by experts employed by the union.

**John Smithee**  
Cambridgeshire

## Real loss

I've just learnt that my old friend and comrade from Leeds, Jim Padmore, has died of cancer. When I was based in Yorkshire we used to meet up regularly to talk politics and he was also an ally in much of my campaign work and political interventions.

I first met him when we were both involved in the Campaign for a New Workers' Party - he had very little time for the dumbed-down politics on which the Socialist Party wanted to base the CNWP. He later helped set up an active Hands Off the People of Iran group in Leeds. He was a subscriber to the *Weekly Worker* right until his death and had plenty of comments and questions based on its content.

When he went back to uni (as a maths student at Leeds) he took up our challenge to join Communist Students and fight (albeit briefly) for his (fairly ortho-Trot) politics within the group. He drew up a raft of amendments to the draft CS platform, which was discussed at our founding conference. After leaving Yorkshire, whenever I met him at some conference or national demo, we would chat and he would fill me in on what was happening up in Leeds.

He was a really nice, if slightly awkward, person. He was generous with his time and books and other publications. He was also reliable. The last I heard from him was on Facebook where he was arguing against the collapse of many left comrades into Scottish nationalism.

One of his most striking features, which put him apart from the rest of the left (and was no doubt why he fell out with so many groups - he had been in Socialist Action, Permanent Revolution, Workers Power, Socialist Fight and possibly others over the years), was his honesty. He was always happy to point out where he disagreed with us and have a debate, but also he was not deterred by being seen to be in agreement with CPGBers by others when that was the case.

His death is very sad news. A real loss.

**Dave Isaacson**  
Milton Keynes

## Do the bus stop

For the two weeks surrounding Remembrance Sunday I wore as a substitute poppy a CPGB badge - when out and about on my outside coat; when at work semi-surreptitiously on a bracelet.

I half-expected some active hostility, but everything passed off without comment, except that two German-speakers I gave advice to at a bus stop about the vagaries of road works and a diversion said they liked my political statement - which gave me an opening to engage them on the esteem in which the CPGB holds the pre-World War I German SPD and Karl Kautsky.

I had little time to elaborate before we were separated by our different bus routes. Nevertheless, I was gratified by this quite unexpected modest positive experience of wearing a 'dissident poppy'.

**Tony Rees**  
email

# 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 November 23, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and *Capital* reading group. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. This meeting: Vol 1, appendix: 'Results of the immediate process of production' (continued). Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk).

## Radical Anthropology Group

Introduction to anthropology  
**Tuesday November 25, 6.30pm:** 'Woman's biggest husband is the moon: how hunter-gatherers maintain social equality'. Speaker: Jerome Lewis.

Cock Tavern, 23 Phoenix Road, London NW1. Talks are free, but small donations are welcome.

Organised by Radical Anthropology Group:  
<http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

## Homes in Hackney

**Thursday November 20, 7.30pm:** Public meeting, Round Chapel, Lower Clapton Road, London E5. Demand more council and social housing in Hackney.

Organised by Hackney People's Assembly:  
[www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/hackney](http://www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/hackney)

## Whistleblowing and the security state

**Thursday November 20, 6pm:** Forum, room B04, Birkbeck main building, University of London, London WC1. Speakers include whistleblowers from GCHQ, NSA, FBI and US state department. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.stopwar.org.uk](http://www.stopwar.org.uk).

## Socialist Theory Study Group

**Thursday November 20, 6pm:** Discussion, Jack Jones House, Unite the Union, 1 Islington, Liverpool L3. Marx's 'Critique of Hegel's philosophy in general', part 3, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844).

Organised by Socialist Theory Study Group:  
[teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com](mailto:teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com).

## Teesside People's Assembly

**Tuesday November 25, 7.15pm:** Meeting, St Mary's Centre, 82-90 Corporation Road, Middlesbrough TS1. Discussing potential actions on local authority cuts and public transport.

Organised by Teesside People's Assembly:  
[www.teessidepa.tumblr.com](http://www.teessidepa.tumblr.com).

## Eye-witness from Gaza

**Wednesday November 26, 6.30pm:** Report-back from trade union representatives, Unite the Union London regional office, 33-37 Moreland Street, London EC1.

Organised by Unite the Union: [www.unitetheunion.org](http://www.unitetheunion.org).

## War, colonialism and protest

**Wednesday November 26, 7pm:** Public meeting, Haringey Kurdish Community Centre, 11 Portland Gardens, London N4. Speakers include: Jeremy Corbyn MP, Katherine Connelly, Dr Hakim Adi.

Organised by North London Stop the War Coalition:  
[northlondonstwc@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:northlondonstwc@hotmail.co.uk).

## Humberside friends of Palestine

**Thursday November 27, 7.30pm:** Buffet fundraiser, Hitchcock's vegetarian restaurant, 1 Bishop's Lane, High Street, Hull. £18 (£15 concessions). Booking required: telephone 01482 320233.

Organised by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign:  
[www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org).

## Isis, Iraq and imperialism

**Saturday November 29, 3pm:** Student educational forum. Room GR3, University of Sheffield students union, Western Bank, Sheffield S10. Speaker: Yassamine Mather.

Organised by Left Unity Sheffield:  
[www.facebook.com/sheffieldleftunity](http://www.facebook.com/sheffieldleftunity).

## Remember the miners' strike

**Tuesday December 2, 7.30pm:** Public meeting, The Mesmerist, 1-3 Prince Albert Street, Brighton BN1 1HE.

Organised by Labour Representation Committee: [www.l-r-c.org.uk](http://www.l-r-c.org.uk).

## Ecosocialism

**Saturday December 6, 1pm:** Meeting, Red Shed, Vicarage Street, Wakefield WF1: 'Green socialist ideas past and present'. Free admission and a free (meat-free!) light buffet. All welcome.

Organised by Wakefield Socialist History Group:  
[www.theredshed.org.uk/SocialHist.html](http://www.theredshed.org.uk/SocialHist.html).

## Trade unions and Palestine

**Saturday December 6, 10am to 4.30pm:** Public meeting, Brighton University, Pavilion Parade Building, Pavilion Parade, Brighton BN2. Free entry.

Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org).

## After the referendum

**Saturday December 13, 12 noon:** Debate, Govanhill Baths, Calder Street, Glasgow G42. Alan Armstrong (RIC) and Sandy McBurney (Left Unity) on the way forward for the left in Scotland.

**2.30pm:** Report-back from Left Unity conference.

Organised by Left Unity Glasgow (South):  
[leftunityglasgowsouth-request@lists.riseup.net](mailto:leftunityglasgowsouth-request@lists.riseup.net).

## 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.

# LETTERS



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

## Best guess

Jack Conrad's 'Neither meek nor mild' (December 18) begins with an acceptable summary of (often forgotten by Christians) struggles of Palestinians/Hebrews, before and after the turn of the first millennium AD against the occupying Roman armies. Disappointingly, Jack's essay degenerates, incredibly 'joining forces' with the later Christian apologists, virtually accepting there *really* was an individual as portrayed in the first three gospels, albeit one who was "a rabbi, a communist and a brave revolutionary".

Jack's comments relating to the putting together of the Christian Bible leave the reader without any comprehension of the *hundreds* of texts that existed at the time the so-called holy scriptures were being formulated; most of them deliberately destroyed by church founders. Today's versions of the Christian scriptures are the end-products of the contemporary peoples and cultures inhabiting the so-called 'holy lands' over many centuries.

Jack is correct to highlight the Palestinian people's longed-for 'messiah' of their scriptures. The messiah they sought was well described by the words often applied to the mythical Jesus - prophet, priest and king - words still sung in the churches, albeit with a *very different* meaning. Today's singers are thinking of a 'spiritual being' in a distant 'heaven'; the first-century freedom fighters were quite literally looking for a military commander.

The legendary Jesus was crucified by the Romans as a political revolutionary (as were the two who died with him). In so far as the Gethsemane incident, which Jack Conrad attempts to expand around a 'literal Jesus personality' to an unacceptable extent, the most telling evidence that the myth in part seems based on an actual incident is that John's gospel specifically states a "cohort" of Roman soldiers (up to 600 troops) was sent to arrest him. In my Sunday school years, I had wondered why the 'kiss of Judas' had been necessary for identifying the sought after prophet. Reading between the lines of the fragments we have - that it was a mass gathering of hundreds of armed individuals, not just the small group of a few disciples depicted in most biblical translations - the story begins to make sense. Anticipating the number of followers assembled and the difficulty of identifying even such a well-known individual, the Romans needed to bribe Judas Iscariot and dispatch a strong military force.

That there was a multitude of 'patriots' leading the fight against the Roman aggressors goes without saying - but Jack is moving towards absurdity when he attempts to take gospel references as being quite literally grounded upon a specific Jesus. The essential source for the person of the Christian messiah, in spite of the multitude of 'revisions' and 'editings', remain the earlier Hebrew scriptures: all the miraculous cures performed by Jesus are forestalled in the texts of Isaiah. Older myths from other cultures were incorporated, but the Hebrew writings provided the essential ingredients for inventing the Passion myth.

Although today's Christians continue to claim the Passion as a central theme of their faith, it just *cannot* have happened as portrayed by the gospels; and we have clear evidence that Jesus' dying words, which so impress Jack Conrad, are a scribal insertion. Has Jack never looked at psalm 22 - clearly the *original* text of the 'passion of Christ'? It opens: "My god, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?" - words later to become the cry of the dying Jesus. Even if he did repeat those words, who heard him? According to the oldest

gospel, none of Christ's 'own people' were present. All the apostles had fled.

The genesis of 'bad guy' Judas Iscariot is of special interest. Psalm 41 refers to a betrayal by a trusted associate, a friend with whom bread had been shared. Acts 1:16-18 interprets this passage as clear prophecy of the part destined to be played by Judas. The role of Judas as 'betrayal' is first known to Jesus, according to the Synoptics, at the last supper: that is, when his dastardly crime had virtually been perpetrated. However, according to John's version, Jesus announces the coming betrayal at the time of the previous passover - *a year before the event* (Jn 6:70); in fact, Jesus *knew from the beginning* Judas was a devil who would betray him (v 64).

As has been emphasised, the original gospels - or rather, those we have inherited - date from the period following the sacking of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple. It was a defeated and demoralised people who sought compensation and the need for new faiths. Sects and cults proliferated and many fragments of writings from this period (the final years of the first century AD) continue to be discovered. The years of revolt and beyond are recreated in semi-spiritual terminology rather than the historical disaster stories - the mythological Jesus was no doubt an amalgam of several active campaigners. But the gospels, however reworked, have become depoliticised, transferring the responsibility for the killing of their hero from the Roman oppressor to the transgressing Semites.

It's important to bear in mind there is no complete version of what we today call the 'New Testament' surviving which is earlier than the reign of the Roman emperor, Constantine (274-337 AD). Let's remind ourselves of his role. Remembered today as 'Constantine the Great' and 'the first Christian emperor', he came from an influential Roman royal family and proved himself a successful general, commanding an army full of Christians. Military successes encouraged the view that Israel's war god smiled on Constantine. In private, however, Constantine had little commitment to Christianity. Indeed, he had earlier been initiated into a cult worshipping the sun god. The Roman Senate celebrated his military victory by erecting a triumphal arch in the Coliseum, with an inscription reading "through the prompting of the deity" - but the deity referred to was not Jesus, but Sol Invictus, the pagan sun god.

All this history is relevant, for it indicates that from its earliest days the church hierarchy did not really take the Bible seriously. It is the Catholic church, not the scriptures, that divulge god's truth and purpose. One is perfectly free to accept the teachings of the church, but not to question or reject them. Freedom can only be expressed through submission - a curious definition of freedom!

Any theory on any topic can, at best, only be described as the 'best guess', given the information to hand. At the time the gospels began to be fabricated at the end of the first century, by definition the stance of 'truth seekers' was no longer based on continuous attempts at improving 'best guesses'. The central aim of the church philosophers became obfuscation - to a great extent, for many centuries, it proved a very successful enterprise.

**Bob Potter**  
email

## Ruminations

Mike Macnair mounts an unfortunate attack on my recent articles on Marxism and political party in capitalism, mistaking dialectical arguments for alleged "vacuous circularity" ('Fantasy history, fantasy Marx', December 18). This leads Macnair to draw conclusions from my writings that are the precise opposite of what I think.

I think that any socialist revolution will necessarily be a democratic revolution and so subject to bourgeois

social relations and the crisis and contradiction of them in capitalism; and that the problem of political party was recognised by Marxism as expressing a new need evident after the industrial revolution and the crisis of liberal politics - a crisis in civil society expressed by the metastatic state. It was capitalism that caused Marx to critique liberalism for its evident inadequacy in the face of new problems. But Marx's critique of the crisis of bourgeois society in capitalism was pursued by the immanent dialectical critique of liberalism, which Marx found socialism to follow. Dick Howard is not mistaken to draw the continuity between the young and mature Marx.

I use terms in their strict Marxist sense, which can be quite peculiar, rather than colloquially. Macnair thinks that finding coherence both within and among the thinking of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lukács and the Frankfurt School, among others, is either "fantasy" or "myth-making". But Macnair disagrees with historical Marxists, or agrees with them only selectively, leaving him free to subordinate their main theses to relatively minor points. Macnair takes the same approach to my writing, making the error converse to cherry-picking, nit-picking: picking apart arguments, and thus losing the forest for the trees. But a whole cloth do not nits make.

Macnair's anti-liberalism is striking. In denying what is new in modern, bourgeois society, Macnair doubts that free social relations could ever replace rule of force. Bourgeois society's liberalism was not only ideology, but also promise. If ideology eclipses promise in capitalism, the task is to find the socialist promise in capitalist ideology. It is not discontinuous with the liberal promise of bourgeois society. Otherwise, we are left with what Kant called mere "civilisation", which is barbaric. It was bourgeois civil society that meant to transcend the rule of law - to transcend the state as such. Socialism, too, wants this. As I pointed out in my article, Macnair elides the difference Marxists recognised between the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and socialism: democratic republicanism as a necessary means and not a desirable end to emancipation.

It goes back to 1848 and its ideology. Bonapartism was for Marx characteristic of the entire revolutionary cycle of 1848 in France, in which Napoleon's nephew, Louis Bonaparte, as the first elected president of the Second Republic (1848-52), and then, after his *coup d'état*, as emperor of the Second Empire (1852-70), could not be characterised as expressing the interest of some non-bourgeois class (the 'peasants', whom Marx insisted on calling, pointedly, "petit bourgeois"), but rather of all the classes of bourgeois society, including the "lumpenproletariat", in crisis by the mid-19th century.

Furthermore, Bonaparte's Second Empire was an international phenomenon, receiving support from British capital. When he took power, Bismarck announced: "The great questions of the time will not be resolved by speeches and majority decisions - that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849 - but by iron and blood." Marx wrote of Bonaparte's coup: "Every demand of the simplest bourgeois financial reform, of the most ordinary liberalism, of the most formal republicanism, of the most insipid democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an 'attempt on society' and stigmatised as 'socialism' ... Bourgeois fanatics for order are shot down on their balconies by mobs of drunken soldiers, their domestic sanctuaries profaned ... in the name of property, of family ... and of order ... Finally, the scum of bourgeois society forms ... the 'saviour of society'."

This is what, according to Marxism, has repeated since 1848. Trotsky was repeating Marx word for word when he called Stalin an "outstanding mediocrity" - what allowed Stalin like Bonaparte to succeed. This expressed politically the greater failure of the "general intellect"

of society, its crisis in capitalism.

Liberalism is not merely a mistake facilitated or trap abetted by "material class interests" of elites; socialism is not proletarian collectivism, as against the alleged individualism of property. Bourgeois society has been, and so socialism will be, an intrinsic relation - a "dialectic" - of the individual and the collective, not some balance between the two. As opposed to Hobbes, Locke, with his profound influence on Rousseau, formed the basis not only for Adam Smith, Kant, Hegel and hence for Marx's own thought, but indeed for American and French revolutionaries (among others) in the 18th century. Bourgeois society has not been mere market relations, but those of labour, as "first property", according to Locke and those who followed him, such as the Abbé Sieyès, in the revolt of the Third Estate.

And labour is a social relation. Modern democracy is based on the social relations of commodity production, including politically. The question is what becomes of this in capitalism, and how the latter marks a potential qualitative change in history.

The dialectical crisis and contradiction of liberalism and socialism means that they are inextricable from each other: socialism must, according to Marxist Hegelianism, be the *Aufhebung* (sublation) of - must realise, as well as overcome, complete as well as transcend - liberalism in modern democracy. Marx thought that this was a new problem of the 19th century that made it impossible to proceed according to either the Jacobinism of the French Revolution, the liberalism of the UK's Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 or the July Revolution of 1830. Something new was revealed in the crisis of the 1840s, leading to 1848 - and to its failure.

When Macnair recommends Chartism as model, he acknowledges that we still live in that failure. What Macnair doesn't recognise, however, is how Marx and later Marxists tried to diagnose as well as work through the problem of political party, which went beyond Chartism.

Regarding the purpose of my arguments, this may indeed be pursuit of "self-knowledge" in "small-e enlightenment". Marxism historically may have been right or wrong, but it can yet be food for thought. I apologise if my ruminations appear obscure.

**Chris Cutrone**  
email

## Alien aid

I think Jack Conrad underplays the need for space exploration ('Mission Mars and the final frontier', December 11). After all, if the human race is to live beyond the lifespan of this planet and this solar system, we have nowhere else to go but space.

True, the massive leap forward will not come until we achieve global communism. The much maligned J Posadas had put forward a simple proposition regarding this in the 1960s, a time of many alleged UFO sightings. Posadas said that in order to traverse the universe it was probable such intelligent beings had solved the basic problem of wage-slavery and achieved a communist world, freeing technological innovation. Which is a sensible enough Marxist hypothesis.

Sadly, an overenthusiastic comrade in Belgium, during a nationwide foundry strike, put out leaflets appealing to the intergalactic comrades to come to the aid of the workers! A bit premature indeed.

**David Douglass**  
South Shields

## Ancient aliens

Andrew Northall raised some interesting points about what he regards as the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration's continued obsession with the three ancient Egyptian gods and goddesses: Osiris, Isis and Horus (Letters, December 18).

The truth is, Nasa's obsession with

ancient Egyptian mythology is neither bizarre nor inexplicable. This is because the foundations of ancient Egyptian religious tradition and, in fact, the religious traditions of much of the ancient world - at least from around 3,000 or 3,200 BC - is mostly based on the Sirius star system. Why this ancient obsession with Sirius and Mars?

A possible reason for this may be found in Robert Temple's 1967 book - republished in 1999: *The Sirius mystery - new scientific evidence for alien contact 5,000 years ago*. What is the Sirius mystery? The mystery is that the Dogon tribe of Mali, west Africa, has possessed for thousands of years detailed knowledge, preserved in their religious tradition, about the Sirius system, knowledge which is not possible for humans to know without advanced radio telescopes. There have been attempts to undermine the work of Robert Temple regarding the Dogon tribe and the Sirius mystery, but in my view such attempts can only influence those who are not versed in the issues concerned and, furthermore, the general outline of much of what the Dogon believe finds corroboration in other traditions. When working on *The Sirius mystery*, Temple had a paper stolen by someone connected to the CIA, and the question naturally arises: why would this work attract the attention of the US intelligence service?

Ancient traditions worldwide claim that extra-terrestrial beings visited this world in the remote past and Dogon claims about beings from the Sirius system represent a particular expression of the general belief. The Dogon tradition also claims that another star, Sirius C, exists within the system, but science remained divided over this until Sirius C was discovered in 1995, thus confirming the Dogon claim. In relation to Sirius B, which the Dogon regard as the most important star within the system, the Dogon claimed for thousands of years that its orbit around the main star, Sirius A, was egg-shaped - in other words, elliptical. Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) only discovered that planets orbit elliptically around stars in the 17th century.

A connection has been found between the Dogons and the ancient Egyptians, and we know that Sirius was the foundation of the religious traditions of ancient Egypt and much of the world from 3,200 BC at least. And it is also quite possible that the name Assyria, or Syria, was derived from Sirius worshippers in ancient times.

The Dogon say their detailed knowledge of the characteristic of the Sirius system came from beings, which they describe as amphibians, who visited Earth thousands of years ago. Intelligent amphibious beings are described in other traditions. Also described in other traditions around the world is that beings, taking reptilian form, mixed their genes with humans. In the *Bible* (Genesis 6), we are told that the sons of 'god' interbred - ie, mixed their genetics with human women, creating the Nephilims who ruled ancient humanity. In most ancient traditions the gods took reptilian form, which would explain why ancient and modern culture is so preoccupied with reptilian, serpent or dragon themes.

This theme of reptilian control of humanity is taken up again by Zulu tradition. In *Children of the Matrix - how an interdimensional race has controlled the world for thousands of years - and still does*, David Icke relates how Credo Mutwa, the South African Zulu historian and shaman, was initiated throughout his life into the secret knowledge of the reptilian control. This, by the way, is the same Credo Mutwa who princess Diana phoned from London in March 1997, claiming she had information on the royal family which would shake the world, before she died in August the same year. What was Princess Diana doing phoning a man who was initiated into a secret knowledge about reptilian control of the world?

Unlike the ancients, I know that

## PROGRAMME

## Proletarian dictatorship and state capitalism

Chris Cutrone of Platypus examines the meaning of political party for the left

Tamás Krausz's recent book *Reconstructing Lenin* (2015) notes the foundational opposition by Lenin to 'petty bourgeois democracy' - Lenin's hostility towards the Mensheviks was in their opportunistic adaptation to petty bourgeois democracy, their liquidation of Marxism.

The real objects of Lenin's political opposition in proletarian socialism were the Narodniks and their descendants, the Socialist Revolutionaries, who were the majority of socialists in Russia in 1917. The SRs included many avowed 'Marxists' and indeed supported the 'vanguard' role of the working class in democratic revolution. The split among the SRs over World War I is what made the October revolution in 1917 possible - the alliance of the Bolsheviks with the Left SRs.

Conversely, the collapse of that alliance in 1918, due to the Bolsheviks' policy of pursuing a peace treaty with Germany at Brest-Litovsk, led to the Russian civil war. The SRs, calling for a "third Russian revolution", remained the most determined enemies of the Bolsheviks, all the way up through the Kronstadt mutiny of 1921, calling for "soviets without political parties": ie, without the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks considered them 'petty bourgeois democrats' and thus 'counterrevolutionaries'. As Engels had already foretold, opposition to proletarian socialism was posed as 'pure democracy'. It was 'democracy' versus the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

Hal Draper's four-volume *Marx's theory of revolution* (1977-90) similarly finds Marx's essential lesson of 1848 in the need to oppose proletarian socialism to petty bourgeois democracy. In the democratic revolution "in permanence" the proletariat was to lead the petty bourgeoisie.

What has happened since Marx and Lenin's time, however, has been the opposite: the liquidation of proletarian socialism in petty bourgeois democracy, and the workers' acceptance of the political lead of the latter - what Trotsky in the 1930s called the "crisis of revolutionary leadership", the result of the self-liquidation of Marxism by Stalinism in the popular front. Today, the left is characterised by the utter absence of proletarian socialism and the complete domination of politics by what Marxism termed petty bourgeois democracy.

This did not, however, prevent Marx - and Lenin, following him - from endorsing the 'bourgeois democratic revolution', which remained necessary not only in apparently holdover feudal-aristocratic states, such as Germany in 1848 or Russia in 1905 and 1917, but also in the US Civil War of 1861-65 and the Paris Commune of 1871. This is because capitalism in the 19th century was a crisis undermining the bourgeois revolution begun in the 16th-17th centuries (in the Dutch Revolt and English Civil War).

The question is, what is the relation between the task of the still ongoing bourgeois democratic revolution, the contradiction of capital and the struggle for socialism? How has Marxism regarded the problem of 'political action' in modern society?

## Programme

Mike Macnair's four-part series on the "maximum programme" of communism - 'Thinking the alternative' *Weekly Worker* April 9, 16 and 30 and May 14 2015 - argues for the need "to proletarianise the whole of global society". Macnair means this more in the political than economic sense. So what is the proletarian as a political phenomenon, according to Marxism? Georg Lukács, following Marx, however, would have regarded the goal



Thomas Jefferson: anti-slavery

of the complete 'proletarianisation of society' precisely as the 'reification' of labour: ie, a one-sided opposition and hypostatisation that Macnair articulates as the proletariat's "denial of property claims" of any kind. But this leaves aside precisely the issue of 'capital' in Marx's sense: the self-contradictory social relation of the workers collectively to the means of production, which for Marxism is not reducible to the individual capitalists' property.

'Capital', in Marx's sense, and the petty proprietorship of shopkeepers, for example, let alone the personal skills of workers (either 'manual' or 'intellectual'), are very different phenomena. Macnair addresses this issue in the final, fourth part of his series, 'Socialism will not require industrialisation' (*Weekly Worker* May 14 2015), which clarifies matters as regards his view of *wage-labour*, but not with respect to *capital* specifically as the self-contradiction of *wage-labour* in society. Moreover, there is the issue of how capital has indeed already 'proletarianised the whole of global society', not only economically, but also politically. This cuts to the heart of what Marx termed 'Bonapartism'.

Macnair's "maximum programme", if even realisable at all, would only reproduce capitalism in Marx's sense. Whereas, for Marx, the proletariat would begin to abolish itself - ie, abolish the social principle of labour - immediately upon the workers taking political power in their struggle for socialism. If not, then petty bourgeois democracy will lead the lumpenproletariat against the workers in Bonapartist politics, typically through nationalism - a pattern seen unrelentingly from 1848, all the way through the 20th century, up to the present. It has taken the various forms of fascism, populism, ethno-cultural (including religious) communalism (eg, fundamentalism), and Stalinist 'communism' itself. How have the workers fared in this? They have been progressively politically pulverised and liquidated, up to today.

Marxism's political allegiance to the working class was strategic, not principled. What Marxism expressed was the socialist intelligentsia's recognition of the 'necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat' as a *means* to achieve socialism, not as an abstract utopia, but rather, as Lenin put it, "on the basis of capitalism itself", and thus the necessary "next stage" of history.

This is because capitalism produces not only proletarianised workers, but also their opposite: a reserve army of lumpenised unemployed to be used against them - not merely economically, but also politically - as fodder for petty bourgeois demagoguery and objects of capitalist technocratic manipulation, but also as enraged masses of capitalism's

discontented. If the working class in revolution would open its ranks to all and thus abolish the lumpenproletariat as well as the petty bourgeoisie through universalising labour, then this would be a civil war measure under socialist leadership, to immediately attack and dismantle the valorisation process of capital, as well as to mobilise the masses against competing petty bourgeois democratic leadership: it will not be as a new, ostensibly emancipatory principle of society. It would be rather what Lukács dialectically considered the "completion of reification" that would also lead potentially to its "negation". It would be to raise to the level of conscious politics what has already happened in the domination of society by capital - its 'proletarianisation' - not to ideologically mystify it, as Macnair does in subsuming it under the democratic revolution, regarded as 'bourgeois' or otherwise.

But this can only ever happen at a global and not local scale, for it must involve a predominant part of the world working class asserting practical governing authority to be effective. This would be what Marxism once called the "proletarian socialist revolution". But it would also be, according to Marx and Lenin, the potential completion of the bourgeois democratic revolution, going beyond it. This ambivalent - 'dialectical' - conception of the proletarian socialist revolution as the last phase of the bourgeois democratic revolution that points beyond it has bedevilled 'Marxists' from the beginning, however much Marx was clear about it. Lenin's and Trotsky's practical political success in October 1917 was in pursuing the necessity Marx had recognised. However, consciousness of that original Marxist intention has been lost.

## Democracy

This must be ideologically plausible as 'socialism', not only to the workers, but to the others they must lead politically in this struggle. That means that socialism must be as compelling ideologically as the working class is politically organised for the dictatorship of the proletariat - what Marx called "winning the battle of democracy". Note well that this was for Marx the battle of democracy, which he took to be already established, and not the battle 'for' democracy as some yet unattained ideal. For Marx democracy was *constitutive* of the modern state in bourgeois society and capitalism: hence his statement that the "secret of every constitution is democracy" - a notion Marx had in common with bourgeois revolutionary thought going back to Machiavelli, but especially with respect to Locke and Rousseau. 'Socialism', as the phenomenon of a new need in capitalism, must win the battle of the democratic revolution. The political party for socialism would be the means

by which this would take place.

The issue is whether we are closer to or rather further away from the prospect of socialism today, by contrast with a hundred years ago. If socialism seems more remote, then how do we account for this, if - as Macnair, for instance, asserts - we have already achieved socially what Marx demanded in the *Critique of the Gotha programme*? The return to predominance of what Marx considered Bonapartism through petty bourgeois democracy after the liquidation of proletarian socialism in the early 20th century would seem to raise questions about the 'progress' of capitalism and of the very social conditions for politics. Have they advanced? It could be equally plausible that conditions have *regressed*, not only politically, but socially, objectively as well as subjectively, and that there has been a greater *divergence* of their interrelation by comparison to past historical moments, especially the revolutionary crisis of 1914-19.

The question, then, would be if the *necessity* of Marx's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' has been overcome or rather *deepened*. Redefining the dictatorship of the proletariat, as Macnair, along with many others, has tried to do, will not suffice to address adequately the issues raised by consideration of historical Marxism, specifically how Marxists once regarded the workers' movement for socialism itself, as well as capitalism, as self-contradictory. And, most pointedly, how Marxism considered capitalism and socialism to be 'dialectically' intertwined, inextricably - how they are really two sides of the same historical phenomenon - rather than seeing them as standing in undialectical antithesis.

The task posed by capitalism has been for proletarian socialism to lead petty bourgeois democracy, not adapt to it. The classic question of politics raised by Lenin - 'Who-whom?' (that is, who is the subject and who is the object of political action) - remains: the history of the past century demonstrates that, where ostensible Marxists leading proletarian socialist parties have tried to use the petty bourgeois democrats, really the latter have used - and then ruthlessly disposed of - them.

So let us return to Marx's formulation of the problem and retrace its history - for instance, through the example of the revolutionary history of the US.

## Dictatorship

In a letter of March 5 1852, Marx wrote to Joseph Weydemeyer that his only original contribution had been recognising the necessity of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Bourgeois thought, Marx wrote, had already recognised the existence and the struggle of classes: indeed, the existence and struggle of classes - the struggle of the

workers against the capitalists - had been recognised by bourgeois thought in terms of liberalism. Recognition of the class struggle was an achievement of liberal thought and politics. Marx thought that socialists had fallen below the threshold of liberalism in avoiding both the necessity of the separation of classes in capitalism and the necessity of the class struggle resulting from that division of society. Socialists blamed the capitalists rather than recognising that they were not the *cause*, but the *effect*, of the self-contradiction of society in capitalism.<sup>1</sup> So Marx went beyond both contemporary liberal and socialist thought in his recognition of the historical necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat revealed by capitalism.

Marx wrote this letter in the wake of the *coup d'état* by Louis Bonaparte and his establishment of the Second Empire. It was the culmination of Marx's writings on the 1848 revolution and its aftermath. Weydemeyer was Marx's editor and publisher for his book on *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Later, in his writings on the Paris Commune in *The civil war in France*, Marx summarised the history of Louis Bonaparte's Second Empire in terms of its being the dialectical inverse of the Commune, and wrote that the Commune demonstrated the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in action. How so?

Marx's perspective on post-1848 Bonapartism was a dialectical conception with respect to the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat that Bonapartism expressed. This was why it was so important for Marx to characterise Louis Bonaparte's success as both 'petty bourgeois' and 'lumpenproletarian', as a phenomenon of the reconstitution of capitalism after its crisis of the 1840s. Bonaparte's success was actually the failure of politics; and politics for Marx was a matter of the necessity of the class struggle of the workers against the capitalists. Bonapartism was for Marx a 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie' - not in the sense of the rule of the capitalists, but rather in terms of the political necessity of the state continuing to organise capitalism on a bourgeois basis and the imperative for doing so after the capitalists had lost the ability to lead through civil society. After all, as Marx put it in *The 18th Brumaire*, in Bonaparte's coup, "bourgeois fanatics for order [were] shot down on their balconies in the name of ... order". It was a 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie' in the sense that it did for them what they could not.

The crisis of bourgeois society in capitalism ran deep. Marx wrote:

Every demand of the simplest bourgeois financial reform, of the most ordinary liberalism, of the most formal republicanism, of the most insipid democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an 'attempt on society' and stigmatised as 'socialism' (*18th Brumaire*).

It was in this sense that the Bonapartist police state emerging from this crisis was a travesty of bourgeois society: why Louis Bonaparte was for Marx a "farical" figure, as opposed to his uncle Napoleon Bonaparte's "tragedy" in the course of the Great Revolution. Where Napoleon tried to uphold such bourgeois values, however dictatorially, Louis Bonaparte and others who took their cue from him after 1848 abjured them all. 1848 was a parody of the bourgeois revolution and indeed undid it. The "tragedy" of 1848 was not of bourgeois society, but of proletarian socialism: Marx described the perplexity of contemporaries, such as Victor Hugo, who considered

Bonapartism a monstrous historical accident and, by contrast, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who apologised for it as some expression of historical necessity, even going so far as to flirt with Louis Bonaparte as a potential champion of the working class against the capitalists - a dynamic repeated by Ferdinand Lassalle in Germany with respect to Bismarck, earning Marx's excoriation. Marx offered a *dialectical* conception of Bonapartism.

## State capitalism

Frankfurt Institute for Social Research director Max Horkheimer's essay on 'The authoritarian state' was inspired by Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the philosophy of history', which were his draft aphorisms in historiographic introduction to the unwritten *Arcades project*, concerned with how the history of the 19th century prefigured the 20th: specifically, how the aftermath of 1848 was repeating itself in the 1920s-30s, the aftermath of failed revolution from 1917-19; how 20th century fascism was a repeat and continuation of 19th century Bonapartism. So was Stalinism.

Horkheimer wrote that the authoritarian state could not be disowned by the workers' movement or indeed separated from the democratic revolution more broadly. It could not be dissociated from Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat, but could only be understood properly dialectically with respect to it. The authoritarian state was descended from the deep history of the bourgeois revolution, but realised only after 1848: only in the crisis of bourgeois society in capitalism, which made the history of the bourgeois revolution appear in retrospect rather as the history of the authoritarian state. What had happened in the meantime?

In the 20th century, the problem of the Bonapartist or authoritarian state needed to be addressed with further specificity regarding the phenomenon of 'state capitalism'. What Marx recognised in the 'necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat' was the same as that of state capitalism in Bonapartism. Hence, the history of Marxism after Marx is inseparable from the history of state capitalism, in which the issue of the dictatorship of the proletariat was inextricably bound up. Marx's legacy to subsequent Marxism in his critique of the Gotha Programme (1875) was largely ignored.

The question is how the Lassallean Social Democratic Workers' Party that Marx's followers joined in Bismarckian Germany was a state capitalist party, and whether and how Marx's followers recognised that problem: would the workers' party for socialism lead, despite Marxist leadership, to state capitalism rather than to socialism? Was the political party for socialism just a form of Bonapartism?

This is the problem that has beset the left ever since the crisis of proletarian socialism over a hundred years ago, in World War I and its aftermath. Indeed, Marxism has seemed to be haunted by this historical verdict against it, as state capitalism, and so disqualified forever as a politics for emancipation.

Marxism fell apart into mutual recriminations regarding its historical failure. Anarchists and council communists blamed 'Leninism'; and 'Leninists' returned the favour, blaming lack of adequate political organisation and leadership for the grief of all spontaneous risings. Meanwhile, liberals and social democrats quietly accepted state capitalism as a fact, an unfortunate and regrettable necessity, to be dispensed with whenever possible. But all these responses were in fact forms of political irresponsibility, because they were all avoidance of a critical fact. Marx's prognosis of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' still provoked pangs of conscience and troubling thoughts. What *had* Marx meant by it?

We should be clear: state capitalism

in the underdeveloped world was always a peripheral phenomenon; state capitalism in the core, developed, capitalist countries posed the contradiction of capitalism more acutely, and in a politically sharpened manner. What was the *political* purpose of state capitalism in post-proletarian society? Rather than in 'backward' Russia or China and other countries undergoing a process of industrialising-proletarianising. Socialism was not meant to be a modernising capitalisation project. And yet this is what it has been. How did socialism *point beyond* capitalism?

## Neoliberalism

Organised capitalism relying on the state is a fact. The only question is the *politics* of it. Lenin, for one, was critically aware of state capitalism, even if he can be accused of having allegedly contributed to it. The question is not whether and how state capitalism contradicts socialism, but how to grasp that contradiction *dialectically*. A Marxist approach would try to grasp state capitalism, as its Bonapartist state, as a form of *suspended revolution*; indeed, as a form of suspended 'class struggle'. The struggle for socialism - or its absence - affects the character of capitalism. Certainly, it affects the *politics* of it.

A note on neoliberalism. As with anything, the 'neo' is crucially important. It is not the liberalism of the 18th or even the 19th century. It is a form of state capitalism, not an alternative to it. Only, it is a form of politically *irresponsible* state capitalism. That is why it recalls the Gilded Age of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the era of 'imperialism', of the imperial - Bonapartist - state. However, at that time, there was a growing and developing proletarian movement for socialism, or 'revolutionary social democracy', led by Marxists, in nearly all the major capitalist countries. Or so, at least, it seemed.

Historically, Marxism was bound up with the history of state capitalism, specifically as a phenomenon of politics after the crisis of 1873. For this reason, the history of capitalism is impacted by the absence of Marxism 100 years later, today, after the crisis of 1973.<sup>2</sup> After 1873, in the era of the second industrial revolution, there was what Marxists once called the 'monopoly capitalism' of global cartels and financialisation, organized by a world system of states, which Marxists regarded as the 'highest (possible) stage of capitalism'. It was understood as necessarily bringing forth the workers' movement for socialism, which seemed borne out in practice: the history from the 1870s to the first decades of the 20th century demonstrated a growth of proletarian socialism alongside growing state capitalism.

Rosa Luxemburg pointed out - against social democratic reformists, who affirmed this workers' movement as already in the process of achieving socialism within capitalism - that "the proletariat ... can only create political power and then transform [*aufheben*] capitalist property". That *Aufhebung* - the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' - would be the *beginning*, not the "end", of the emancipatory transformation of society. As Michael Harrington noted, drawing upon Luxemburg and Marx, "political power is the unique essence of the socialist transformation".<sup>3</sup> It is this political power that the 'left' has avoided since the 1960s.

## History

In the US, the liberal democratic ideal of Jeffersonian democracy, the idyll of the American Revolution, was shattered by the crack of the slave whip - and by the blast of the rifle shot to stop it. Jefferson had tried to call for abolition of slavery in his 1776 Declaration of Independence, accusing British policy of encouraging slavery in the colonies, but the Continental

Congress deleted the passage. Jefferson fought against slavery his entire political life. Towards the end of that life, in a letter of August 7 1825, Jefferson wrote to the abolitionist, women's rights activist and utopian socialist, Frances Wright, supporting her founding the Nashoba Commune in Tennessee for the emancipation of slaves through labour:

I do not permit myself to take part in any new enterprises, even for bettering the condition of man, not even in the great one which is the subject of your letter [the abolition of slavery], and which has been thro' life that of my greatest anxieties. The march of events has not been such as to render its completion practicable within the limits of time allotted to me; and I leave its accomplishment as the work of another generation. and I am cheered when I see that on which it is devolved, taking it up with so much good will, and such mind engaged in its encouragement. The abolition of the evil is not impossible: it ought never therefore to be despaired of. Every plan should be adopted, every experiment tried, which may do something towards the ultimate object. That which you propose is well worthy of trial. It has succeeded with certain portions of our white brethren, under the care of a [Christian communist George] Rapp and an [utopian socialist Robert] Owen; and why may it not succeed with the man of colour?<sup>4</sup>

Jefferson's election to president in 1800, through which he established the political supremacy of his new Democratic-Republican Party, was called a 'revolution', and indeed it was. Jefferson defeated the previously dominant federalists. What we now call the Democratic Party, beginning under Andrew Jackson, was a split and something quite different from Jefferson. The Republican Party, whose first elected president in 1860 was Abraham Lincoln, was a revolutionary party, and in fact sought to continue the betrayed revolution of Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans. The Republicans came out of the destruction of the Whig party, which produced a revolutionary political crisis leading to the Civil War. They were the party of the last great political revolution in American politics, the Civil War and Reconstruction under Ulysses S ('Unconditional Surrender') Grant that followed. Its failure demonstrated, as the revolutions of 1848 had done in Europe, the limits of political and social revolution in capitalism: it showed the need for socialism.<sup>5</sup>

The last major crisis of US politics was in the 1960s 'New Left' challenge to the ruling Democratic Party's New Deal coalition that had been the political response to the 1930s great depression.<sup>6</sup> In the 1930s Franklin D Roosevelt had disciplined the capitalists in order to save capitalism, subordinating the working class to his efforts. He thus remade the Democratic Party. Trotsky, for one, considered FDR New Dealism, along with fascism and Stalinism, despite great differences, a form of "Bonapartism".<sup>7</sup> The crisis of the 1960s was essentially the crisis of the Democratic Party, challenged by both the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war. The Republicans, first led by Richard Nixon in 1968 then by Ronald Reagan in 1980, were the beneficiaries of that crisis. Both the 1930s and 1960s-70s, however, fell below the standard of Radical Republicanism in the 1860s-70s, which was the most democratic period in US history. It is something less than ironic that the Democrats, considered the 'left' of the American political party system, have been the most acutely counterrevolutionary of Bonapartist parties. This despite Democratic Party presidential candidate John F Kennedy's

declaration on October 12 1960 that the strife of the 20th century - expressed by the cold war struggles of communism and decolonisation - was an extension of the American Revolution to which the US needed to remain true.<sup>8</sup>

The history of the state in the modern era is inextricable from the politics of revolution.<sup>9</sup> The crisis of the state is always a crisis of political parties; crises of political parties are always crises of the state. The crisis of the state and its politics is a phenomenon of the crisis of capitalism.

The question of left and right is a matter of the degree of facilitation in addressing practically and with consciousness the problem of capitalism, and the problem of capitalism is inextricable from the state.

## Regression

Politics today tends to be reduced to issues of policy, of *what* to do, neglecting the question of *who* is to do it. But this is depoliticising. Politics is properly about the matter of mobilising and organising people to take action: their very empowerment is at least as important as what they do with it. Marxism never identified itself directly with either the working class or its political action, including workers' revolution and any potential revolutionary state issuing from this.<sup>10</sup> But Marxism advocated the political power of the working class, recognising why the workers must rule society in its crisis of capitalism. Marxism assumed the upward movement of this trend from the 1860s into the early 20th century. But, in the absence of this, other forces take its place, with more or less disastrous results. After 1919 matters have substantially regressed.

Marxism recognised the non-identity of socialism and the working class. 'Revolutionary social democracy' of the late 19th century, in its original formulation by Bebel and Kautsky, followed by Lenin and Luxemburg, was the union of the socialist ideological movement of the revolutionary bourgeois intelligentsia with the workers in their class struggle against the capitalists.<sup>11</sup> For Marxism 'politics' is the class struggle. For Marx, the capitalists are only constituted as a class through opposing the working class's struggle for socialism (see Marx's 1847 *The poverty of philosophy*). Otherwise, as Horkheimer recognised, there is no capitalist class as such, but competing rackets. Adam Smith, for instance, had recognised the need for the workers to collectively organise in pursuit of their interests; Smith favoured high wages and low profits to make capitalism work. Marx's critique of political economy was in recognition of the limits of bourgeois political economy, including and especially that of the working class itself. Marx was no advocate of proletarian political economy, but its critic.

The antagonism of workers against the capitalists is not itself the contradiction of capital. However, it expresses it.<sup>12</sup> The goal of socialism is the abolition of political economy, not in terms of the overthrowing of the capitalists by the workers, but the overcoming of and going beyond the principle of labour as value that capital makes possible.<sup>13</sup> The question is how the potential for socialism can transcend the politics of capitalism - can emerge out from the class struggle of the workers against the capitalists - that otherwise reconstitutes it.

## Rejecting

A political party is necessary to preserve the horizon of proletarian socialism in capitalism over time. Otherwise, the workers will have only consciousness of their interests that reproduces capitalism, however self-contradictorily. A political party is necessary for class struggle to take place at all. According to Marx, the democratic republic is the condition under which the class struggle in capitalism will be fought out to

completion; and the only possibility for the democratic republic in capitalism is the dictatorship of the proletariat, or a revolutionary workers' state.

Such a revolutionary politics would be concerned not with the *whether*, but only the *how*, of socialism. It will be marked by great social strife and political struggle, with competing socialist parties. Its purpose will be to make manifestly *political* the civil war of capitalism that occurs nonetheless anyway. We are very far from such a politics today.

The notion of politics apart from the state, and of politics apart from parties is a bourgeois fantasy - precisely a *bourgeois* fantasy of liberal democracy that capitalism has thrown into crisis and rendered obsolete and so impossible. Capitalism presents a new political necessity, as Marx and his best followers once recognised. Anarchism is truly 'liberalism in hysterics' in denying the necessity of politics, in denying the need for political party. Neo-anarchism today is the natural corollary to neoliberalism.

In the absence of a true left, politics and the state - capitalism - will be led by others. In the absence of meeting the political necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat, we will have more or less, hard or soft, and more or less *irresponsible* capitalist state dictatorship. We will have political irresponsibility.

To abandon the task of political party is to abandon the state, and to abandon the state is to abandon the revolution. It is to abandon the political necessity of socialism, whose task capitalism presents. It is to abandon politics altogether, and leave the field to pseudo-politics, to political irresponsibility. The 'left' has done this for more than a generation, at least since the 1960s. What would it mean to do otherwise? ●

## Notes

1. See my 'Class-consciousness (from a Marxist perspective) today' *Platypus Review* No51, November 2012.
2. See my '1873-1973, the century of Marxism: the death of Marxism and the emergence of neoliberalism and neo-anarchism' *Platypus Review* No47, June 2012.
3. 'Marxism and democracy' *Praxis International* 1:1, April 1981.
4. <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=FOEA-chron-1820-1825-08-07-3>.
5. Lincoln's Gettysburg address declared the goal of the Union in the US Civil War to be a "new birth of freedom". But its declaration that it was fought so that "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the Earth" expressed the sobering consciousness that, by contrast with the European states after the failures of the revolutions of 1848, the US was the last remaining major democratic-republican state in the world.
6. See my 'When was the crisis of capitalism? Moïse Postone and the legacy of the 1960s New Left' *Platypus Review* No70, October 2014.
7. See *The death agony of capitalism and the tasks of the Fourth International aka Transitional programme for socialist revolution* (1938).
8. Kennedy was speaking at the Hotel Theresa in New York: "I am delighted to come and visit. Behind the fact of Castro coming to this hotel, Khrushchev coming to Castro, there is another great traveller in the world, and that is the travel of a world revolution, a world in turmoil. I am delighted to come to Harlem and I think the whole world should come here and the whole world should recognise that we all live right next to each other, whether here in Harlem or on the other side of the globe. We should be glad they came to the United States. We should not fear the 20th century, for this worldwide revolution which we see all around us is part of the original American Revolution." Fuller excerpts from Kennedy's speech can be found at [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25785](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25785).
9. See 'Revolutionary politics and thought' *Platypus Review* No69, September 2014.
10. See L. Trotsky, 'Stalinism and Bolshevism' (1937).
11. See VI Lenin *What is to be done? Burning questions of our movement* (1902), and *One step forward, two steps back: the crisis in our party* (1904), where, respectively, Lenin argues for the non-identity of socialist and trade union consciousness, and defines revolutionary social democracy as Jacobinism tied to the workers' movement.
12. See my 'Democratic revolution and the contradiction of capital' *Weekly Worker* October 16 2014; and my follow-up letters in debate with Macnair (November 20 2014, January 8, January 22 and April 16 2015).
13. See my 'Why still read Lukács? The place of "philosophical" questions in Marxism' *Platypus Review* No63, February 2014; abridged in *Weekly Worker* January 23 2014.

THEORY

# Back to Herbert Spencer

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

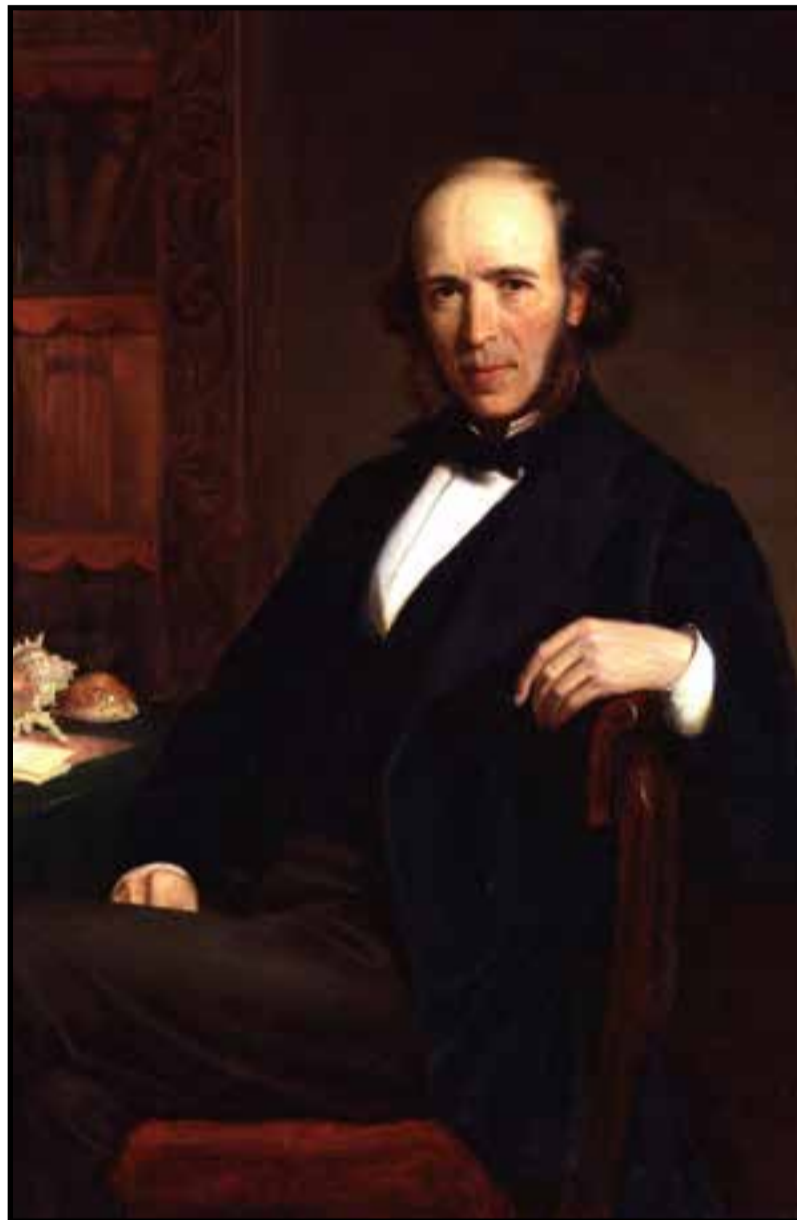
Herbert Spencer's grave faces Marx's at Highgate Cemetery in London. At his memorial, Spencer was honoured for his anti-imperialism by Indian national liberation advocate and anti-colonialist Shyamji Krishnavarma, who funded a lectureship at Oxford in Spencer's name.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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](http://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.

The *Weekly Worker* is licensed by November Publications under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>. ISSN 1351-0150.



## THEORY

# What was social democracy?

Chris Cutrone of the Platypus Affiliated Society traces the origins of current socialist terminology<sup>1</sup>

Communism is an ancient concept of the community sharing everything in common. It has its roots in religious communes. Socialism by contrast is a modern concept that focuses on the issue of 'society', which is itself a bourgeois concept. Marx sought to relate the two concepts of communism and socialism to capitalism.

Social democracy is a concept that emerged around the 1848 revolutions, which posed what was at the time called the 'social question': namely the crisis of society evident in the phenomenon of the modern industrial working class's conditions. Social democracy aimed for the democratic republic with adequate social content.

Marxism has in various periods of its history used all three concepts - communism, socialism and social democracy - not exactly interchangeably, but rather to refer to and emphasise different aspects of the same political struggle. For instance, Marx and Engels distinguished what they called "proletarian socialism" from other varieties of socialism, such as Christian socialism and utopian socialism. What distinguished proletarian socialism was twofold: the specific problem of modern industrial capitalism to be overcome; and the industrial working class as a potential political agent of change.

Moreover, there were differences in the immediate political focus, depending on the phase of the struggle. 'Social democracy' was understood as a means for achieving socialism; and socialism was understood as the first stage of overcoming capitalism on the way to achieving communism. Small propaganda groups such as the original Communist League of Marx and Engels, for which they wrote the *Communist manifesto*, used the term 'communism' to emphasise their ultimate goal. Later, the name 'Socialist Workers Party' was used by the followers of Marx and Engels in Germany to more precisely focus their political project specifically as the working class struggling to achieve socialism.

So where did the term 'social democracy' originate, and how was it used by Marxists - by Marx and Engels themselves as well as their immediate disciples?

The concept of the 'social republic' originates in the revolution of 1848 in France - specifically with the socialist, Louis Blanc, who coined the expression, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need", to describe the goals of the society to be governed by the democratic republic. Marx considered this to be the form of state in which the class struggle between the workers and capitalists would be fought out to a conclusion.

The essential lesson Marx and Engels learned from their experience of the revolutions of 1848 in France and Germany, as well as more broadly in Austria and Italy, was what Marx, in his 1852 letter to his colleague and publisher, Joseph Weydemeyer, called his only "original discovery": namely the "necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat"; or, as he had put it in his summing-up report on the revolutions of 1848 in his address to the central committee of the Communist League in 1850, the need for "the revolution in permanence", which he thought could only be achieved by the working class taking independent political action in the leadership of the democratic revolution.

This was a revision of Marx and Engels's position in the earlier

*Communist manifesto* on the eve of 1848, which was to identify the working class's struggle for communism with the democratic revolution. They claimed that "communists do not form a party of their own, but work within the already existing [small-d!] democratic party". Now, after the experience of the failure of the revolutions of 1848, Marx asserted the opposite: the necessary separation of the working class from other democratic political currents.

## Petty bourgeois

What had happened to effect this profound change in political perspective by Marx and Engels?

Marx had come to characterise the failure of the revolutions of 1848 in terms of the treacherous and conservative-reactionary role of what he called the "petty bourgeois democrats", whom he found to be constitutionally incapable of learning from their political failures and the social reasons for this.

The historical horizon for the petty bourgeois democratic discontents in the social crisis of capitalism was too low to allow the contradiction of capital to come within political range of mere democracy, no matter how radically popular in character. The problem of capitalism was too intractable to the ideology of petty bourgeois democracy. The problem of capitalism exceeded the horizon of the French revolutionary tradition, even in its most radical exponents, such as Gracchus Babeuf's Jacobin "conspiracy of equals". Such democracy could only try to put back together, in essentially liberal-democratic terms, what had been broken apart and irreparably disintegrated in industrial capitalism.

This was not merely a matter of limitation in so-called 'class interest or position', but rather the way the problem of capitalism presented itself. It looked like irresponsible government, political hierarchy and economic corruption, rather than what Marx thought it was: the necessary crisis of society and politics in capitalism, the necessary and not accidental divergence of the interests of capital and wage-labour, in which society was caught. Capital outstripped the capacity for wage-labour to appropriate its social value. This was not merely a problem of economics, but politically went to the heart of the modern democratic republic itself.

The petty bourgeois attempt to control and make socially responsible the capitalists, and to temper the demands of the workers in achieving democratic political unity, was hopeless and doomed to fail. But it still appealed nonetheless. And its appeal was not limited to the socioeconomic middle classes, but also, and perhaps especially, to the working class, as well as to 'enlightened, progressive' capitalists.

The egalitarian sense of justice and fraternal solidarity of the working class was rooted in the bourgeois social relations of labour, the exchange of labour as a commodity. But industrial capital went beyond the social mediation of labour and the bourgeois common sense of cooperation. Furthermore, the problem of capital was not reducible to the issue of exploitation, against which the bourgeois spirit rebelled. It also went beyond the social discipline of labour - the sense of duty to work.

For instance, the ideal of worker-owned and -operated production is a petty bourgeois democratic fantasy. It neglects the fact that, as Marx observed, the conditions for industrial production are not essentially the workers' own



Netherlands: Social Democratic Workers Party (1918)

labour, but rather more socially general: production has become the actual property of society. The only question is how this is realised. It can be mediated through the market, as well as through the state - the legal terms in which both exchange and production are adjudicated (that is, what counts as individual and collective property): issues of eminent domain, community costs and benefits, etc. Moreover, this is global in character. I expect the foreign government of which I am *not* a citizen to nonetheless respect my property rights. Bourgeois society already has a global citizenry, but it is through the civil rights of commerce, not the political rights of government. However, capitalism presents a problem, and a crisis, of such global liberal democracy.

Industrial capital's value in production cannot be socially appropriated through the market, and indeed cannot at all any longer be appropriated through the exchange-value of labour. The demand for universal-suffrage democracy arose in the industrial era out of the alternative of social appropriation through the political action of the citizenry via the state. But Marx regarded this state action no less than the market as a hopeless attempt to master the social dynamics of capital.

At best, the desired petty bourgeois political unity of society could be achieved on a temporary national basis, as was effected by the cunning of Louis Bonaparte, as the first elected president of Second Republic France in 1848, promising to bring the country together against and above the competing interests of its various social classes and political factions. Later, in 1851 Bonaparte overthrew the republic and established the Second Empire, avowedly to preserve universal (male) suffrage democracy and

thus to safeguard "the revolution". He received overwhelming majority assent to his *coup d'état* in the plebiscite referendum he held both at the time of his coup and 10 years later to extend the mandate of the empire.

Marx and Engels recognised that to succeed in the task of overcoming capitalism in the struggle for proletarian socialism it was necessary for the working class to politically lead the democratic revolution. This was the basis of their appropriation of the term 'social democracy' to describe their politics in the wake of 1848: the task of achieving what had failed in mere democracy.

The mass political parties of the Second, Socialist International described themselves variously as 'socialist' and 'social democratic'. 'International social democracy' was the term used to encompass the common politics and shared goal of these parties.

They understood themselves as parties of not merely an international, but indeed a cosmopolitan politics. The Second International regarded itself as the beginnings of world government. This is because they regarded capitalism as already exhibiting a form of world government in democracy; what Kant had described in the 18th century, around the time of the American and French revolutions, as the political task of humanity to achieve a "world state or system of states" in a "league of nations" - the term later adopted for the political system of Pax Americana that US president Woodrow Wilson tried to achieve in the aftermath of World War I. As the liberal chronicler of Napoleon, Benjamin Constant, had observed 100 years before Wilson, in the wake of the French Revolution and its ramifications throughout Europe, the differences between nations were

"more apparent than real" in the global society of commerce that had emerged in the modern era. But capitalism had wrecked the aspirations of Kant and Constant for global bourgeois society.

The International offered the alternative, "Workers of the world, unite!", to the international strife of capitalist crisis that led to the modern horrors of late colonialism in the 19th century and finally world war in the 20th.

## Redefinition

The political controversy that attended the first attempt at world proletarian socialist revolution in the aftermath of World War I divided the workers' movement for socialism into reformist social democracy and revolutionary communism and a new Third International. It made social democracy an enemy.

This changed the meaning of 'social democracy' into a gradual evolution of capitalism into socialism, as opposed to the revolutionary political struggle for communism. But what was of greater significance than the 'revolution' sacrificed in this redefinition was the cosmopolitanism of the socialist workers who had up until then assumed that they had no particular country to which they owed allegiance.

The unfolding traumas of fascism and World War II redefined social democracy yet again, lowering it still further to mean the mere welfare state, modelled after the dominant US's New Deal and the 'four freedoms' the anti-fascist Allies adopted as their avowed principles in the war. It made the working class into a partner in production, and thus avoided what Marx considered the inevitable contradiction and crisis of production in capitalism. It turned socialism into a mere matter of distribution.

For the last generation, since the 1960s, this has been further degraded to a defensive posture in the face of neoliberalism, which, since the global crisis and downturn of the 1970s, has reasserted the rights of capital.

The "spectre of communism" that Marx and Engels had thought haunted Europe in the post-industrial revolution crisis of capitalism in the 1840s continues to haunt the entire world today, after several repetitions of the cycle of bourgeois society come to grief - not as a desired dream misconstrued as a feared nightmare, but rather as the evil spirit that does not fail to drive politics, no matter how democratic, into the abyss. And, as in Marx's time, the alternating "ethical indignation" and "enraptured proclamations of the democrats" continue to "rebound" in "all the reactionary attempts to hold back" the ceaseless crisis of capitalism, in which "all that is solid melts into air".

We still need social democracy, but not as those who preceded Marxism thought - to mitigate capitalism, as was attempted again, after the failure of Marxism to achieve global proletarian socialism in the 20th century - but rather to make the necessity for communism that Marx recognised over 150 years ago a practical political reality. We need to make good on the "revolution in permanence" of capitalism that constantly shakes the bourgeois idyll, and finally leverage the crisis of its self-destruction beyond itself ●

## Notes

1. This article is based on a talk originally presented on a panel with Bernard Sampson (Communist Party USA), Karl Belin (Pittsburgh Socialist Organizing Committee) and Jack Ross (author of *The Socialist Party of America: a complete history*) at the eighth annual Platypus Affiliated Society international convention April 1 2016 in Chicago.

## HISTORY

# Sacrifice and redemption

Chris Cutrone of the Platypus Affiliated Society recounts the struggle of Rosa Luxemburg for the workers' party to base itself on the goal of socialism

In one of her earliest interventions in the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), participating in the notorious theoretical 'revisionist dispute', in which Eduard Bernstein famously stated that "the movement is everything, the goal nothing". the 27 year-old Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) clearly enunciated her Marxism: "It is the final goal alone which constitutes the spirit and the content of our socialist struggle, which turns it into a class struggle."<sup>1</sup>

## Critique of socialism

What did it mean to say that socialist politics was necessary to have "class struggle" at all? This goes to the heart of Luxemburg's own Marxism, and to her most enduring contribution to its history: her Marxist approach to the political party for socialism - a *dialectical* understanding of class and party, in which Marxism itself was grasped in a critical-dialectical way. When Luxemburg accused Bernstein of being "undialectical", this is what she meant: that the working class's struggle for socialism was itself self-contradictory, and its political party was the means through which this contradiction was expressed. There was a dialectic of means and ends, or of 'movement' and 'goal', in which the dialectic of theory and practice took part: Marxism demanded its own critique. Luxemburg took the controversy of the revisionist dispute as an occasion for this critique.

In this, Luxemburg followed the young Karl Marx's own formative dialectical critiques of socialism when he was in his 20s, from his September 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge calling for the "ruthless critique of everything existing" to the critique of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in the 1844 *Economic and philosophic manuscripts* and *The poverty of philosophy* (1847), as well as in *The German ideology* and its famous *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845). Marx had written of the socialist movement:

The internal difficulties seem to be almost greater than the external obstacles ...

[W]e must try to help the dogmatists to clarify their propositions for themselves. Thus, communism, in particular, is a dogmatic abstraction; in which connection, however, I am not thinking of some imaginary and possible communism, but actually existing communism, as taught by Cabet, Dézamy, Weitling, etc. This communism is itself only a special expression of the humanistic principle, an expression which is still infected by its antithesis - the private system. Hence the abolition of private property and communism are by no means identical, and it is not accidental, but inevitable, that communism has seen other socialist doctrines - such as those of Fourier, Proudhon, etc - arising to confront it, because it is itself only a special, one-sided realisation of the socialist principle ...

Hence, nothing prevents us from making criticism of politics, participation in politics, and therefore *real* struggles, the starting point of our criticism, and from identifying our criticism with them ... We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for ...

The reform of consciousness consists *only* in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in awakening it out of its dream about

itself, in *explaining* to it the meaning of its own actions.

Such formulations recurred in Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* a couple of years later:

But that the secular basis detaches itself from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the cleavages and self-contradictions within this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, in itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice.

For Marx, this meant that socialism was the expression of the contradiction of capitalism and as such was itself bound up in that contradiction. A proper dialectical relation of socialism with capitalism required a recognition of the dialectic within socialism itself. Marx followed Hegel in regarding contradiction as manifestation of the need for change. The "proletariat" - the working class after the Industrial Revolution - contradicted bourgeois society, not from outside but from within. As such, the contradiction of capitalism centred on the proletariat itself. This is because for Marx "capitalism" is nothing in itself, but only the crisis of bourgeois society in industrial production and hence its only meaning is the expression of the *need for socialism*. The very existence of the proletariat - a working class expropriated from its bourgeois property-rights in labour as a commodity - demanded socialism.

## Lassallean party

But had the social democratic workers' party been from its outset a force for counterrevolution - for preserving capitalism - rather than for revolutionary transformation and the achievement of socialism? Its roots in Ferdinand Lassalle's formulation of its purpose as the "permanent political campaign of the working class" evinced a potential contradiction between its Lassalleanism and Marxism.

Marxists had not invented the social democratic workers' party, but rather joined it as an emergent phenomenon of the late 19th century. The social democratic workers' party in Germany - what became the SPD - had, through its fusion of 1875 at Gotha, attained Marxist or 'revolutionary' leadership. But this had elicited Marx's famous *Critique of the Gotha programme*, to which Marx's own followers, Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, could only shrug their shoulders at the difficulty of pleasing the "old men in London" (that is, Marx and Engels). The development of the SPD towards its conscious direction beyond mere Lassalleanism was more clearly enunciated in the SPD's Erfurt programme of 1891. Nonetheless the ghost of Lassalle seemed to haunt subsequent developments and was still present, according to Engels's critique of it, in the 'Marxist' Erfurt programme itself. (Indeed, one of Rosa Luxemburg's earliest achievements in her participation in the life of the SPD was to unearth and discover the significance of Engels's critique of Bebel, Kautsky and Bernstein's Erfurt programme.)

Luxemburg, in her critique of the SPD as a manifestation of contradiction, followed Marx and Engels, whose recognition was the means to advance it beyond itself. Lassalle had made the mistake of opposing the political against and derogating the economic action of the workers, rejecting labour unions, which he called merely the "vain efforts of *things* to behave like

*human beings*";<sup>2</sup> thus ontologising the political struggle. For Lassalle, the workers taking political power would be tantamount to the achievement of socialism; whereas for Marx this would be merely a transitional revolutionary "dictatorship of the proletariat" that would lead to socialism. Engels called it the transition from the "governing of men" to the "administration of things" - an eminently *dialectical* formulation, since humans are both subjects *and* objects of society.

Lassalle's political ontology of socialism was complementary to the one-sided, 'vulgar Marxist' misapprehensions of the revisionists, who prioritised and indeed ontologised the economic over the political, reducing the social to the economic and relating the social to the political "mechanically" and "undialectically" - neglecting the *contradiction* between them in an "economic determinism" that subordinated politics. Where Lassalle subordinated economics to politics in a "state socialism", Marx regarded this rather as a state *capitalism*. Indeed, despite or rather *due* to this antinomy, the Lassalleans and the economic reformists actually converged in their political perspectives - giving rise later to 20th century welfare-state capitalism through the governance of social democratic parties.

Rather than taking one side over the other, Luxemburg, as a Marxist, approached this problem as a real contradiction: an antinomy and dialectic of capitalism itself that manifested in the workers' own discontents and struggles within it, both economically and politically. For instance, Luxemburg followed Marx in recognising that the Lassallean goal of the workers achieving a "free state" in political revolution was a self-contradiction: An unfree society gave rise to an unfree state; and it was society that needed to be emancipated from capitalism. But this was a contradiction that could be *posed* only by the workers' revolutionary political action and seizing of state power - if only to "wither" it away in the transformation of society beyond capitalism.

In this way the Lassallean party was not a mistake, but rather a necessary stage manifesting in the history of the workers' movement. So it needed to be properly recognised - 'dialectically' - in order to avoid its one-sided pitfalls in the opposition of revisionist, reformist economic evolutionism versus the Lassallean political revolutionism. Kautsky followed Marx in a critical endorsement of Lassalleanism in regarding the dictatorship of the proletariat as the seizing of state power by the workers' party for socialism. Hence, Luxemburg expressed her sincere "gratitude" that the revisionists had occasioned this critical self-recognition, by posing the question and problem of 'movement' and 'goal'.

## Antinomy of reformism

Luxemburg made her great entrance onto the political stage of her time with the pamphlet *Social reform or revolution?* (1900). In it, Luxemburg laid out how the original contradiction of capitalism - between its chaotic social relations and its socialisation of production - had been further developed, exacerbated and deepened by the development of a new contradiction: namely the growth of the workers' movement in political organisation and consciousness. Its movement for socialism was a self-contradictory expression of the contradiction of capitalism. This contrasted with Bernstein's view

that the growth and development of the workers' movement was the overcoming of the contradiction of capitalism and the gradual 'evolution' of socialism. For Bernstein, the movement for socialism was the achievement of socialism, whereas the goal of socialism was a dispensable figment, a useful enabling fiction.

For Luxemburg, however, the contradiction of the industrial forces of production against their bourgeois social relations in capitalism was recapitulated in the contradiction between the means and ends of the workers' movement for socialism. Socialism was not built up within capitalism; but only the contradiction of capital deepened through workers' struggle against exploitation. How so? Their demand for a share of the value of production was a *bourgeois* demand: the demand for the value of their labour as a commodity. However, what was achieved by increases in wages, recognition of collective bargaining rights, legal protections of workers in capitalist labour contracts and the acceptance of responsibility of the state for the conditions of labour, including the acceptance of the right to political association and democratic political participation in the state, was not the *overcoming* of the problem of capital - that is, the overcoming of the great divergence and social contradiction between the value of capital and wages in industrial production - but rather its exacerbation and deepening through its broadening onto society as a whole.

What the workers received in reforms of capitalism was not the value of their labour-power as a commodity, which was relatively minimised by developments of industrial technique, but rather a cut of the profits of capital, whether directly through collective bargaining with the employers or indirectly through state distribution of social welfare benefits from the tax on capital. What Bernstein described optimistically as the socialisation of production through such reforms was actually, according to Luxemburg, the 'socialisation' of the *crisis* of capitalist production.

The workers' party for socialism, through its growth and development on a mass scale, thus increasingly took political responsibility for capitalism. Hence, a new contradiction developed that was focused on the party itself. Was its purpose to manage capitalism or rather, as Luxemburg put it in her 1898 Stuttgart speech, to "play the role of the banker-lawyer who liquidates a bankrupt company"? Luxemburg posed the political task of the socialist party in *Reform or revolution?* succinctly: "It is an illusion, then, to think that the proletariat can create economic power within capitalist society. It can only create political power and then transform [*aufheben*] capitalist property." The proletarian socialist party was the means for creating that political power. This differed from the development of bourgeois social relations in feudalism that led to revolution:

What does it mean that the earlier classes, particularly the third estate, conquered economic power before political power? Nothing more than the historical fact that all previous class struggles must be derived from the economic fact that the rising class has at the same time created a new form of property, upon which it will base its class domination.

However, according to Luxemburg, "The assertion that the proletariat, in contrast to all previous class struggles, pursues

its battles not in order to establish class domination, but to abolish all class domination, is not a mere phrase." This is because the proletariat does not develop a new form of "property" within capitalism, but rather struggles economically, socially and politically, on the basis of "bourgeois property" - on the basis of the bourgeois social relations of *labour*, or of labour as a commodity. What the working class's struggle within capitalism achieves is consciousness of the need to overcome labour as a commodity, or to transform capital from bourgeois property into social property that is no longer mediated by the exchange of labour. This is what it meant for Marx that the proletariat struggles not to "realise", but to *abolish*, itself, or how the proletariat goes from being a class "in itself" to becoming a class "for itself" (*The poverty of philosophy* 1847) in its struggle for socialism.

For Luxemburg, the achievement of reforms within capitalism accomplish nothing but the greater practical and theoretical realisation, or "consciousness", of the need to abolish labour as a commodity, since the latter has been outstripped by industrial production. The further economic, social and political reforms only dramatically increase this disparity and contradiction between the economic value of labour as a commodity and the social value of capital that must be appropriated by society as a whole.

In other words, the workers' movement for socialism and its institution as a political party is necessary to make the otherwise chaotic, unconscious, 'objective' phenomenon of the economic contradiction and crisis of wage-labour and capital into a conscious, 'subjective' phenomenon of *politics*. As Luxemburg wrote later, in *The crisis of German social democracy* (aka the 'Junius pamphlet', 1915),

Socialism is the first popular movement in world history that has set itself the goal of bringing human consciousness, and thereby free will, into play in the social actions of mankind. For this reason, Friedrich Engels designated the final victory of the socialist proletariat a leap of humanity from the animal world into the realm of freedom. This 'leap' is also an iron law of history bound to the thousands of seeds of a prior, torment-filled and all-too-slow development.

But this can never be realised until the development of complex material conditions strikes the incendiary spark of conscious will in the great masses. The victory of socialism will not descend from heaven. It can only be won by a long chain of violent tests of strength between the old and the new powers. The international proletariat under the leadership of the social democrats will thereby learn to try to take its history into its own hands; instead of remaining a will-less football, it will take the tiller of social life and become the pilot to the goal of its own history.

Why "violent tests of strength"? Was this mere "revolutionary" passion, as Bernstein averred? No: as Marx had observed in *Das Kapital*, in the struggle over the "working day", or over the social and legal conventions for the condition of labour time, workers and capitalists confronted each other, both with "bourgeois right" on their side. But, "Where right meets right, force will decide." Such contests of force did not *decide* the issue of right in capitalism, but only channelled it in a *political* direction. Both capital and wage-labour retained their social rights, but the political arena in which their

claims were decided shifted from civil society to the state, posing a crisis - the need for "revolution".

## 1848: state and revolution

For Luxemburg, the modern state was itself merely the "product of the last revolution": namely the political institutionalisation of the condition of class struggle up to that point. The "last revolution" was that of 1848, in which the "social question" was posed as a crisis of the democratic republic. As such, the state remained both the subject and the object of revolutionary politics.

Marx had conflicted with the anarchists in the First International over the issue of the need for "political" as well as "social action" in the working class's struggle for socialism. The revisionists such as Bernstein had, to Luxemburg's mind, reverted to the pre-Marxian socialism of anarchism in abandoning the struggle for political power in favour of merely social action. In this, Luxemburg characterised Bernstein as having regressed (like the anarchists) to mere "liberalism". What Bernstein like the anarchists denied was what Marx had discovered in the experience of the revolutions of 1848 - namely, the necessity of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" - and hence the necessary political separation of the workers' 'social democracy' from the mere 'democracy' of the bourgeois revolution, including the necessary separation from the "petty bourgeois democrats" who earned Marx's most scathing scorn.

While liberals denied the need for such 'social democracy' and found political democracy to be sufficient, anarchists separated the social from the political, treating the latter as a fetishised realm of collusion in the bourgeois state and hence capitalism. Anarchists from the first - Proudhon - had avoided the issue of political revolution and the need to take state power; whereas Marxists had recognised that the crisis of capitalism inevitably resulted in political crisis and struggle over the state: if the working class failed to act, others would step in their place. For Marx, the need for workers' political revolution to achieve socialism was expressed by the phenomenon of Louis Bonaparte's election in 1848 and *coup d'état* in 1851 - the inability of the "bourgeoisie to rule" any longer through civil society, while the proletariat was as yet politically undeveloped and thus "not ready to rule" the state. But for Marx the necessity of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was that the "workers must rule" politically in order to overcome capitalism economically and socially.

Marx characterised Louis Bonaparte's politics as both "petty bourgeois" and "lumpenproletarian", finding support among the broad masses of capitalism's discontented. But, according to Marx, their discontents could only reproduce capitalism, since they could only at best join the working class or remain dependent on the realisation of the value of its labour as a commodity. Hence, there was no possible withdrawal from the crisis of bourgeois politics and the democratic state, as by libertarians and anarchists, but the need to develop political power to overcome capitalism. For the capitalist wage-labour system, with its far-reaching effects throughout society, to be abolished required the political action of the wage-labourers. That the "workers must rule" meant that they needed to provide political leadership to the exploited and oppressed masses. If the organised working class did not, others would provide that leadership, as Bonaparte had done in 1848 and 1851. The means for this was the political party for socialism. As Luxemburg put it in her 1898 Stuttgart speech,

[B]y final goal we must not mean ... this or that image of the future state, but the prerequisite for any

future society: namely the conquest of political power. This conception of our task is closely related to our conception of capitalist society; it is the solid ground which underlies our view that capitalist society is caught in insoluble contradictions, which will ultimately necessitate an explosion, a collapse - at which point we will play the role of the banker-lawyer who liquidates a bankrupt company.

The socialist political party was for Luxemburg the means for this necessary achievement of political power. But the party was not *itself* the solution, but rather the necessary manifestation and concretisation of the *problem* of political power in capitalism and indeed the problem of 'society' itself.

## 1905: party and class

Luxemburg took the occasion of the 1905 revolution in Russia to critique the relation of labour unions and the SPD in her pamphlet on *The mass strike, the political party and the trade unions* (1906). This was a continuation of Luxemburg's criticism of the reformist, revisionist view of the relation of the economic and political struggles of the working class for socialism, which had found its strongest support among the labour union leadership.

In bringing to bear the Russian experience in Germany, Luxemburg reversed the usual assumed hierarchy of German experience over Russian "backwardness". She also reversed the developmental order of economic and political struggles, the mistaken assumption that the economic must precede the political. The "mass" or political strike had been associated with social- and political-historical primitiveness, with pre-industrial struggles and pre-Marxian socialism - specifically anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism (especially in the Latin countries), which had prioritised economic and social action over political action. Luxemburg sought to grasp the changed historical significance of the political strike; that it had become, rather, a symptom of advanced, industrial capitalism. In the 1905 Russian revolution, the workers had taken political action before economic action, and the labour unions had originated out of that political action, rather than the reverse.

The western Russian empire was rapidly industrialised and showed great social unrest in the 1890s-1900s. It exhibited the most up-to-date techniques and organisation in industrial production: The newest and largest factories in the world at this time were located in Russia. Luxemburg was active in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) in the Russian part of Poland, through her own organisation, the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL). The 1905 revolution was precipitated by a *political* and not 'economic' crisis: the shaking of the tsarist state in its losing war with Japan 1904-05. This was not merely a liberal-democratic discontent with the arbitrary rule of the Russian absolutism. For Luxemburg, the Russo-Japanese war was a symptom of capitalism, and so was the resulting crisis of tsarism in Russia triggered by this war. The political strike was, as she put it, a revolt of "bourgeois Russia": that is, of the modern industrial capitalists and workers, against tsarism.

What had started out in the united action of the capitalists and workers striking economically against the tsarist state for liberal-democratic political reasons unfolded into a class struggle by the workers against the capitalists. This was due to the necessity of reorganising social provisions during the strike, in which mass-action strike committees took over the functions of the usual operations of capitalism and indeed of the tsarist state itself.

This had necessitated the formation of workers' own collective-action organisations. Luxemburg showed how the economic organisation of the workers had developed out of the political action against tsarism, and that the basis of this was in the necessities of advanced industrial production. In this way, the workers' actions had developed, beyond the liberal-democratic or 'bourgeois' discontents and demands, into the tasks of "proletarian socialism". Political necessity had led to economic necessity (rather than the reverse: economic necessity leading to political necessity).

For Luxemburg, this meant that the usual assumption in Germany that the political party, the SPD, was 'based' on the labour unions, was a profound mistake. The economic and social-cooperative actions of the unions were 'based', for Luxemburg, on the political task of socialism and its political party. This meant prioritising the political action of the socialist party as the real basis or substance of the economic and other social action of the working class. It was the political goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat through socialist revolution that gave actual substance to the workers' economic struggles, which were, for Luxemburg, merely the necessary preparatory "school of revolution".

Luxemburg wrote her pamphlet while summering at a retreat with Lenin and other Bolsheviks in Finland. It was informed by her daily conversations with Lenin over many weeks. Lenin had previously written, in *What is to be done?* (1902 - a pamphlet commissioned and agreed upon by the Marxist faction of the RSDLP as a whole, those who later divided into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks), that economism and workerism in Russia had found support in Bernsteinian revisionism in the SPD and the greater Second International, trying to subordinate the political struggle to economic struggle and thus to separate them. In so doing, they like the revisionists had identified capitalist development with socialism rather than properly recognising these as being in growing contradiction. Lenin had, like Luxemburg, regarded such workerism and economism as 'reformist', in the sense of separating the workers' struggles for reform from the goal of socialism that needed to inform such struggles. Luxemburg as well as Lenin called this 'liquidationism', or the dissolving of the goal into the movement, liquidating the need for the political party for socialism. In *What is to be done?* Lenin had argued for the formation of a political party for the workers' struggle for socialism in Russia. He took as polemical opponents those who, like the revisionists in Germany, had deprioritised the necessity of the political party, thus deprioritising the *politics* of the struggle for socialism, limiting it to economic action.<sup>3</sup> The political party had thus redeemed itself in the 1905 revolution in Russia, showing its necessary role for the workers' political, social and economic action, confirming Lenin's and Luxemburg's prior arguments against economism.

Luxemburg regarded the lessons of the 1905 revolution to be a challenge to and hence a "crisis" - a potential critical turning point - of the SPD in Germany. Continuing her prosecution of the revisionist dispute, Luxemburg argued for the concrete necessity of the political leadership of the party over the unions that had been demonstrated by the 1905 revolution in Russia. By contrast, the tension and indeed contradiction between the goal of socialism and the preservation of the institutions of the workers' movement - specifically of the labour unions' self-interest - which might be threatened by the conservative reaction of the state against the political action of the socialist party, showed a conflict between movement and goal.

The revisionists thought that a mass political strike would merely provoke the right into a *coup d'état*.

## Demand for redemption

Walter Benjamin, in his draft theses, 'On the concept of history' (aka 'Theses on the philosophy of history', 1940), cited Luxemburg in particular when describing history itself as the "demand for redemption". Not only did Luxemburg raise this demand with her famous invocation of Marx and Engels on the crossroads in capitalism of "socialism or barbarism", but as a historical figure she herself calls out for such redemption.

The conflict in and about the party on which Luxemburg had focused was horribly revealed later by the outbreak of war in 1914, when a terrible choice seemed posed between the political necessity to overthrow the *Kaiserreich* state to prevent or stop the war and the need to preserve the workers' economic and social organisations in the unions and the party. The war had been the *Kaiserreich's* pre-emptive *coup d'état* against the SPD. The party capitulated to this, in that it facilitated and justified the unions' assertion of their self-preservation at the cost of cooperation with the state's war. This self-preservation - what Luxemburg excoriated as trying to "hide like a rabbit under a bush" temporarily during the war - may have been justified if these same organisations had served later to facilitate the political struggle for socialism after the Prussian empire had been shaken by its loss in the war. But the SPD's constraining of the workers' struggles to preserve the state - limiting the German Revolution 1918-19 to a 'democratic' one against the threat of 'Bolshevism' - meant the party's suppression of its own membership. Past developments had prepared this. The revisionists' prioritisation of the movement and its organisations over the goal of socialism had been confirmed of what Luxemburg and Lenin had always warned against: the adaptation and liquidation of the working class's struggles into, not a potential springboard for socialism, but rather a bulwark of capitalism; the transformation of the party from a revolutionary into a counterrevolutionary force. As Luxemburg had so eloquently put it in World War I, the SPD had become a "stinking corpse" - something which had through the stench of decomposition revealed itself to have been dead for a long time already - dead for the purposes of socialism. The party had killed itself through the devil's bargain of sacrificing its true political purpose for mere self-preservation.

In so doing, by acting supposedly in the interests of the workers, the workers' true interests - in socialism - were betrayed. As Luxemburg put it in the *Junius pamphlet*, the failure of the SPD at the critical moment of 1914 had placed the entire history of the preceding "40 years" of the struggles by the workers - since the founding of the SPD in 1875 - "in doubt". Would this history be liquidated without redemption? This underscored Luxemburg's warning, decades earlier, against dissolving the goal into the movement that would betray not only the goal, but the movement itself. Reformist revisionism devoured

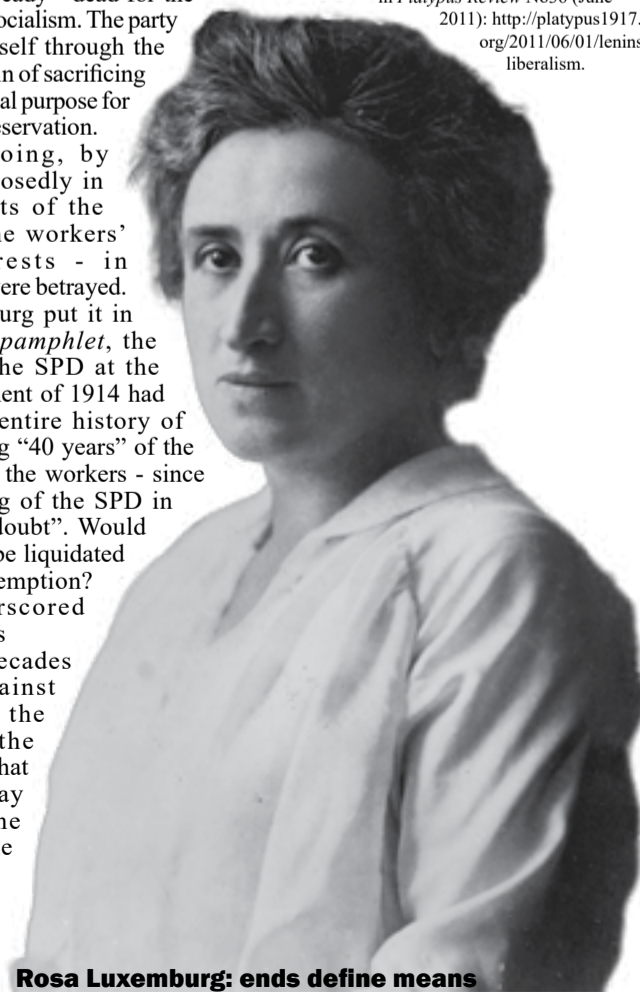
itself. The only point of the party was its goal of revolution; without it, it was "nothing" - indeed worse than nothing: It became a festering obstacle. The party was for Luxemburg not only or primarily the 'subject', but was also and especially the *object* of revolutionary struggle by the working class to achieve socialism. This is why the revolution that the party had facilitated was for Luxemburg merely the beginning and not the end of the struggle to achieve socialism. The political problem of capitalism was manifest in how the party pointed beyond itself in the revolution. But without the party that problem could never even manifest, let alone point beyond, itself.

During the German Revolution - provoked by the collapse of the *Kaiserreich* at the end of World War I - Luxemburg split and founded the new Communist Party of Germany (KPD), joining Lenin in forming the 'Third' or Communist International, in 1919: to make clear the political tasks that had been manifested and advanced, but ultimately abdicated and failed, by the social democratic parties of the Second International in war and revolution. Just as Luxemburg and Lenin had always maintained that the political party for socialism was necessary to advance the contradiction and crisis of capitalism, as it had developed from Marx's time to their own, so it became necessary in crisis to split that party and found a new one. Turning the international war of capitalism into a socialist revolution meant manifesting a civil war within the workers' movement and indeed within Marxism itself.

Whereas her former comrades in the SPD recoiled from her apparent revolutionary fanaticism, and 'saved' themselves and their party by betraying its goal (but ultimately faded from historical significance), Luxemburg, as a loyal party-member, sacrificed herself for the goal of socialism, redeeming her Marxism and making it profoundly necessary, thus tasking our remembrance and recovery of it today ●

## Notes

1. D Howard (ed) *Selected political writings of Rosa Luxemburg* New York 1971, pp38-39; also available online at [www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1898/10/04.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1898/10/04.htm).
2. Quoted in G Lukács, "The standpoint of the proletariat" *History and class-consciousness: studies in Marxist dialectics* Cambridge MA 1923, p195; available online at [www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc07\\_5.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc07_5.htm).
3. See also my essay, 'Lenin's liberalism', in *Platypus Review* No36 (June 2011): <http://platypus1917.org/2011/06/01/lenins-liberalism>.



Rosa Luxemburg: ends define means