

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity



weekly
worker



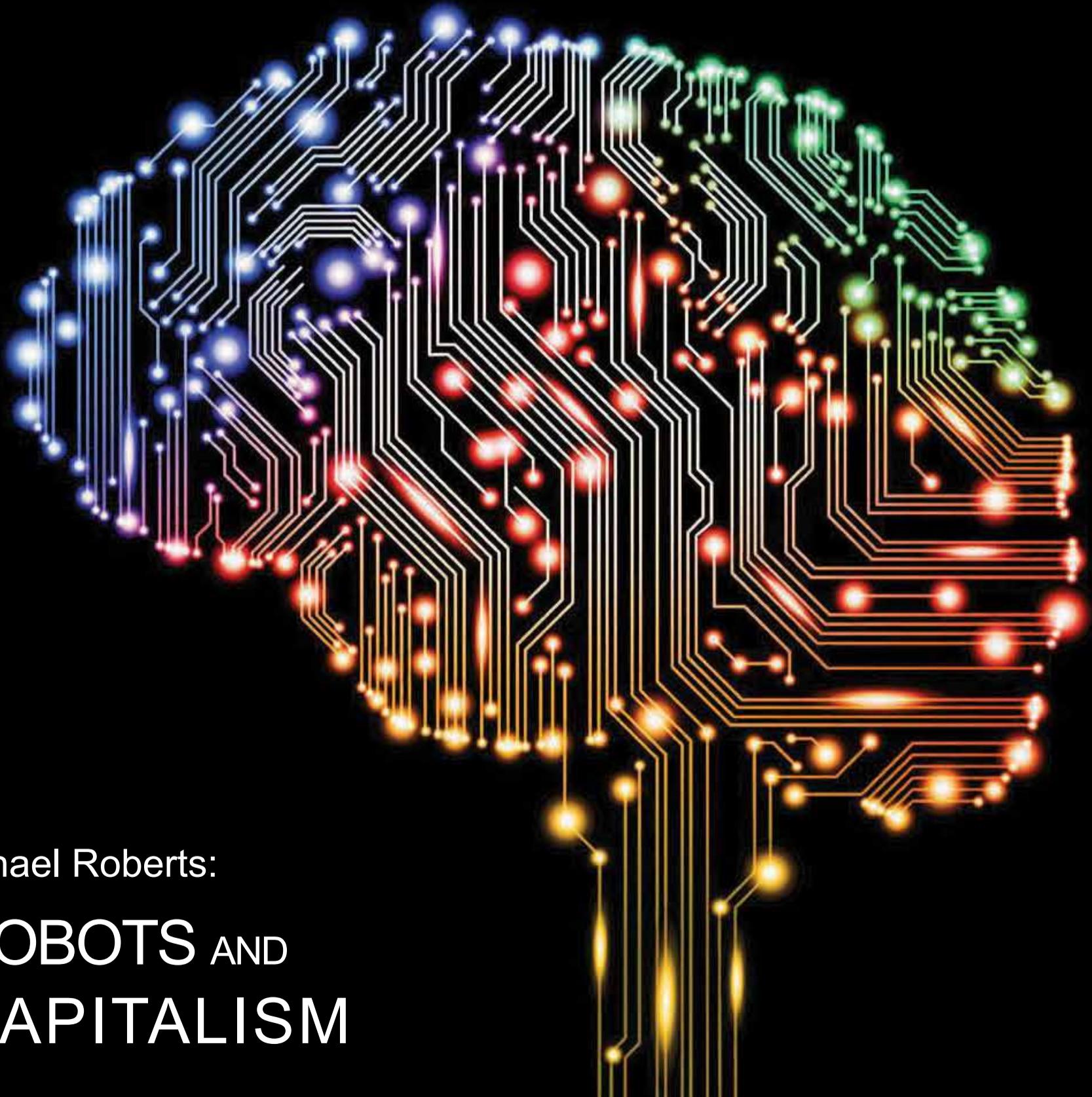
**Evgeny Lebedev and
the strange death of
the liberal media**

- Junior doctors after the strikes
- Alain Badiou: structural disorder
- Mikhail Bakunin considered
- Rachael Cusk's 'Outline'

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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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Michael Roberts:

**ROBOTS AND
CAPITALISM**

LETTERS



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

Talent

I enjoyed Marc Mulholland's survey of socialist pronouncements on talent and the relation of individual skill to the education and opportunity available in society ('The problem of unequal abilities', February 11). It's not about whether you have to pay people: it's the gap between some salaries and the majority.

Of course, apologists for the remuneration gap tend to fall back on the market - that great objective arbiter of how much you get: this manager's salary is the market rate, such-and-such knew what the market wanted, so-and-so read the market correctly and the market has recompensed them.

But is that how it actually works? How many people believe wholly in the market? Would Cameron declare that, if a Syrian could supply a service better or even just cheaper, the job should go to them rather than a British candidate? It would be political suicide for him to believe in the free market to that extent.

One entrepreneur hero of our time is the late Steve Jobs. Without him there would be no Apple computer, right? He created Apple. That was his talent - he is famous for it.

Some may have heard of another Steve - Steve Wozniak. He designed video games and what became the Apple I computer. His friend, Jobs, however, got a position with Atari, when Atari thought that Jobs had invented Wozniak's game. Wozniak then invented an arcade computer game, but Jobs was paid for that too, though he gave Wozniak a cut. They set up Apple and poached some people to be executives. In 1984 Apple Co introduced the Macintosh and put out a commercial during the 1985 Super Bowl. Jobs had already started wearing black turtle-neck jumpers and had bought a Manhattan apartment. Well, you get the idea. Maybe Jobs was more plausible.

What if either of the Steves had been Ugandan? Would they have got to the US to start their company? Or would they have failed like that Syrian that Cameron will not support? What about the input and influence of American education and investment in technology? (Most 20th century inventions are American.) What about the banks, the local 'skills' in advertising and marketing, not to mention the mega economic base of California?

Human beings aren't Robinson Crusoe, as Marx pointed out, totally creating their world with just a few inherited objects and unassisted, for a long time, by anyone else. We're not free as demons or hard-wired like robots, but 'polytechnic workers' (to use Marc's and Marx's phrase) - companionable, flexible and improvising within structures. Most of us are in fact smoothing the work of institutions that don't always run as they should on paper. Survival depends on it.

In history rather than myth, natural talent counts for 30%, 'society' for 70%. That's not good enough to justify paying anyone crap wages and a few staff officers millions.

Mike Belbin
email

Morons

"Should socialists aim to offer incentives to the 'gifted and talented'?"

Even posing the question - which is ludicrous, by the way - shows that the CPGB has a fair share of 'middle class' morons in the party (I associate 'middle class' and 'moron' together). The question is rooted in racialism and the ideas of the colonial occupiers, who view the people as inferior and themselves as superior. It shouldn't be posed in a socialist publication - even posing it indicates racist attitudes. It's a question beloved by American white supremacists, who see the African-American people as

inferior. It's a false, loaded and insulting question, based on a wrong proposition.

The human race is an intelligent species by its very nature. Dividing the human race is fundamental to capitalist rule. It's a sign of human crisis. We must integrate or be wiped out by war. Any education system that divides people isn't an education system at all. We need a comprehensive system of education. We must unite the human race. That's what socialism is all about.

Elijah Traven
Hull

Euro-democracy

The European Union is a bureaucratic semi-state built by the European ruling classes to further their interests within Europe and compete more effectively with the US, China, Japan, India, Russia and Brazil, etc in the world market. The development of Euro-capital has gone furthest in 19 of the 28 EU states in the euro zone.

The EU, and even more the euro zone, is thus divided ever more sharply into Euro-capital and Euro-democracy: in other words, the blood-sucking vampires and the working people of Europe. If Euro-capital is now more highly integrated than ever, it has exposed the fact that Euro-democracy is lagging way behind. There is a massive democratic deficit, which gives free range to the criminals and the vampire classes.

Euro-democracy is an expression of the collective power of working people across Europe. It resides in the democratic struggles of the people, not in the European parliament - a creature set up and controlled by the European Commission on behalf of Euro-capital, much like the British crown controls what goes on in the Palace of Westminster.

In this respect 'little Britain' is among the most backward and conservative parts of the EU. The British crown is outside the euro and remains determined to steer clear of any Euro-democracy which might threaten the City of London - the blood banks where the world's vampires store their surplus supplies.

The UK's European referendum is no more than an opportunity for the crown to extract more concessions for the City, whilst promoting its anti-working class, racist, neoliberal agenda. It is not enough, however, to say that the working class should not vote in any way to endorse Cameron's dirty little deal.

The referendum is an opportunity for the City and the big corporations to gain more profits in a gamble that Cameron can win a 'remain' majority. Gambling and fixing the result is what they are experts at. But it is equally an opportunity for European democracy to take a step forward by winning support and mobilising for a programme for a European democratic revolution.

The programme of a European social republic has not been agreed by the progressive working class, socialist and environmentalist forces across the EU. That shows how weak we are. But we can say that the programme of democratic revolution must stand for a democratic and federal social republic. It must contain the constitutional right of nations to self-determination.

The right to self-determination does not exist in the EU. It is in the hands of the European ruling classes, not the English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Greek or Portuguese people. European national self-determination would certainly make it impossible for English votes to force Scotland out of the EU. Indeed it would spell the end of the 'little Britain' union which has been rendered obsolete by the EU.

The British unionists must stand for an exit. It is the only logical position against the threat to the UK from a European democratic revolution. Most of the 'little Britain' left do not understand or support the constitutional-legal right to self-determination. They have been incapable of recognising the distinction

between self-determination and their own ruling classes opportunistically granting a referendum, as they did for Scotland in 2014 and now over the EU.

The programme of a European social republic and democratic (or working people's) revolution is not, however, limited to European-level democratic mobilisations and, for example, calls for a European constituent assembly. The Greek people do not have to wait for the rest of us. We don't have to wait for Holland, Spain, Belgium, etc to abolish the remnants of the European monarchies. We can do our bit in the UK.

The European democratic revolution is not a crude, simultaneous event, but a combined and uneven process. It does not contradict the Greek, Spanish or UK democratic revolutions. On the contrary, a democratic revolution in the backwater of 'little Britain' would not merely catch up, but become the vanguard of democratic revolution across the continent.

So abolishing the monarchy, House of Lords and the Acts of Union, which would mark the beginning of democratic revolution in the UK, are not separate from, but part of, the European revolution. Whether England, Scotland, Wales or Ireland take the lead, working people would have to reach out to democratic allies in the rest of Europe.

The UK Independence Party is absolutely right that the conservative programme of defending the British union is for keeping control of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and leaving the EU. Voting 'no' in the Scottish referendum and voting for exit from the EU go together. But if you are the City of London, then voting 'no' for Scotland and 'remain' in the EU makes perfect sense.

Steve Freeman
Left Unity and Rise

Garbled guff

The Socialist Party continues its long-running anti-EU stance. There is all the usual garbled guff about a 'bosses' club', which, of course, it is - any countries cooperating under capitalism are a bosses' club. But would a separated UK be any less imperialist?

There is a case to be made that Britain outside the EU would be a lot nastier, with a 'leave' result riding on a storm of xenophobic and particularly anti-migrant feeling, and a Tory government forced both to reflect that and to carve out a new political and economic niche in the world. Little Englanders looking to a renewed 'Great' Britain. That would be a definite defeat for the working class, for migrants, for internationalism and for socialist ideas.

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership is an issue that has been seized on in particular by 'the left', but the arguments around this are spectacularly specious. The narrative is: TTIP is anti-working class (true), and therefore we oppose it; it is being negotiated with the EU, which is likely to accept it (true), and therefore we oppose the EU. This conclusion seems logical, but it would have been laughed out of court by the ancient Greeks, who developed rules of logic and debate.

Let's think about this. Britain has a pro-TTIP Tory government. At the moment TTIP has to get the agreement of many nations. If Britain leaves the EU, what is to stop a direct negotiation on TTIP, and might that actually be quite easy to achieve? Oh shit!

Lana Zhet
Teesside

Undecided

I am still undecided about the 'correct' way to vote. But, as I look around for answers, I was struck by the op-ed piece in *The Guardian* of February 17, which is for 'in'. Their cogent argument is that voting 'out' means that we are then left with, even if not allied with, the rabid-fantastic imperial xenophobes.

But they point out that continued EU membership is necessary because:

"Labour's pro-European case is based on big strategic progressive pillars - including shared security against climate change and crime, cross-border solidarity among peoples and making the best use of Europe's collective strength in the world."

I read that to mean that they see a sort of inter-imperialist (or should that be ultra-imperialist?) fantasy, where Germany, France and the UK could submerge their rivalry enough to compete with the US, Russia, China, etc more effectively. Quite what "cross-border solidarity" is supposed to mean, apart from Fortress Europe, god knows.

So, it is important in my opinion to take seriously - ie, analytically, but not knee-jerk reflexively - what a 'bosses' club' means in terms of total effect. We are going into a more intense period of inter-imperialist rivalry. Quite how this translates for revolutionary communists into a strategy, and what is to be our agitation and propaganda, I wish I knew.

A United Socialist States of Europe? Just how Euro-centric is that, at a moment when China is being scapegoated? There are calls for import controls across Europe, while Chinese steelworkers are being put out of work faster than European ones! So what do we call for? Not 'Save our steel', which pits Europe's workers in affected industries against workers across the globe, whose conditions are equally disastrous.

I realise that I am not providing anything but questions, but too many current 'answers' are formulaic and fail to address the global crisis of economies and working class organisation. More discussion before a June referendum is very necessary.

Tom Richardson
Middlesbrough

Same here

Irrespective of our political differences with the CPGB, we welcome its stand on the issue of the EU referendum. Like the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency in Britain and its international comrades, you refuse to support either continuing membership in the imperialist EU or British national imperialism.

The British supporters of the RCIT have taken a similar stand, as we outlined last August in a relevant resolution, as well as in an extensive essay ('Boycott Cameron's trap: neither Brussels nor Downing Street! For abstention in Britain's EU Referendum!') and 'The British left and the EU referendum: the many faces of pro-UK or pro-EU social-imperialism').

In fact, it is a shame that most of the British left either support critically (or not so critically) the 'little Britain' option (eg, Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party in England and Wales) or the pro-EU option (Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Workers Power). They fail to take an independent, internationalist working class stand on such a crucial issue. In the past, when Workers Power was still a revolutionary organisation, it had the same position as the RCIT Britain and the CPGB have today.

However, it will be crucial this year, with the upcoming referendum, to help the working class in Britain to take a viewpoint based on the principle of class independence.

Laurence Humphries
RCIT

Surreal NHS

My partner works full-time as a highly motivated, conscientious and entirely dedicated hospital nurse, as she has done for the past 25 years. When originally deciding to become a nurse and subsequently when achieving her qualifications to do so, alongside her fundamental wish to care for patients, she was equally drawn by the ethos and social principles of working within the NHS (indeed, as were the vast majority of her nursing student colleagues).

As part of her professional conscientiousness, my partner has made

sure to engage in 'lifelong learning': in other words, kept herself fully abreast of developments in both medical knowledge and practice - just this year upgrading her nursing degree to full 'honours' status.

Running along in the background of this tale is the fact that, about four years ago, my partner was obliged to transfer from her NHS contract of employment to a new set-up, where she was employed by a 'community interest company'. Generally applying to all those working in community healthcare, the thinking behind this process originated during the era of - and thus under the auspices and via the policies of - Tony Blair's New Labour, when introducing what they called their 'Agenda for Change' within the NHS.

In December 2015, my partner's reluctantly accepted but duly imposed CIC employer announced that it had decided not to apply to renew (in April 2016) its own five-year contract with the regional primary health authority and local GP doctors' clinical commissioning group, as it "cannot do so on a viable basis in the current financial climate".

Very recently, at a time when my partner was signed off on a short period of GP-sanctioned sickness leave, she was phoned at home on several occasions either by her ward sister or matron, specifically in order to 'check on her progress' and urge her to "return to work as soon as possible" (I quote exactly).

That pestering and coercion eventually culminated in a phone call from her direct line manager, the ward sister, who resorted to shouting and issuing only half-veiled threats about my partner's security of employment - all as part of what, in effect, were attempts to bully her back to work. (All members of staff are expected to adhere to a guideline 'scale of points' for time taken off work due to illness - again a practice introduced as part of their 'Agenda for Change'/Wal-Mart-style terms and conditions.)

As such, the incident I'm outlining and indeed the behaviour on the part of the ward's 'medical management' is explained (but, of course, not excused) by the existence of quite extreme staff shortages at the hospital concerned. That problem largely being caused by recurring sickness amongst my partner's colleagues, running in parallel with many months of both the NHS centrally as well as my partner's local CIC having introduced an official policy of strongly discouraging, or even flatly not allowing, the operational frontline of any hospital to call upon either commercial agency or NHS 'bank' workers to fill any resultant gaps.

Following my partner's eventual return to work, very sensibly she made an official complaint in writing to her employer, the CIC, about what she herself described to them as "the appalling and disgraceful treatment and moreover the demoralising disrespect" she had received. She has now received a formal apology of sorts, albeit couched in a variety of Harvard Business School 'newspeak'.

And what about the likely knock-on detrimental effects upon the health and welfare of those now indefinitely short-staffed team of specialist community nurses, healthcare assistants and indeed management - all due to their additional workload and resultant stress? Those nothing but honourable and decent folk who had been expecting the arrival of my partner as a new (and in fact replacement) colleague and, by precisely the same token, those with whom she'd hoped to share both her valuable qualities and proven professional abilities.

And so it goes on, as dictated by the current methods and principles and socio-political motivations-cum-machinations that lie behind the structuring and financing of our UK healthcare system. Maybe running it into the ground is part of its eventually even more extensive/neo-con planned privatisation?

Bruno Kretschmar
email

NHS



In need of illegal solidarity

Far from over

Where next for the junior doctors? Richard Galen discusses the options

On February 11, one day after the second 24-hour non-emergency junior doctor strike, health secretary Jeremy Hunt announced that he would be taking his 'nuclear' option and imposing his widely-loathed new contract, the subject of medics' anger and protest over the last few months.

Based on a dishonest claim - sparked by some inconclusive research into increased mortality for patients admitted to hospital from Friday to Monday - that services will be improved over the weekend if only doctors would accept a "seven-day NHS", the new contract would see more weekend working for less pay, with no provision to increase staffing levels during the week to compensate.

The doctors' union, the British Medical Association, has stated that it will fight the imposition, and its junior doctors committee is currently trying to decide what action to take. Several options are being discussed amongst the junior doctors themselves, with consultations held by the BMA taking place across the country over the next few weeks.

Calls have been made for further strike action, perhaps over a longer period, or this time to include emergency and on-call staff as well. However, it is unlikely this will have the desired effect. What if Hunt and the department of health just sit it out, as with the first two strikes? If we just return to work after, say, a week to find nothing has changed, what will that do for morale? The detrimental effect of such action is felt first and foremost by our patients, not the government against whom it is directed. Hunt, Cameron and co would surely continue their campaign of smears - the BMA is led by politically driven militants who do not care about patient safety, while apparently we doctors are so stupid that we have all been taken in by the union's false claims. It would also see a drop in public support - one of our most important assets in the battle against the new contract.

Another option discussed has been the formation of a not-for-profit

'doctors agency', perhaps combined with mass resignations, through which we would sell our labour to NHS trusts on our own terms - this has been likened to the way barristers work. This idea has been bolstered by the revelation from the department of health that NHS foundation trusts (whereby hospitals are rewarded for good performance by being granted semi-autonomous status) are not mandated to bring in the new contract, and are able to negotiate locally.

However, for this to work, it would require an unprecedented level of unity, cooperation and participation in what is a very risky exercise, and it could see individual juniors deciding to go their own way at a time when a united front is essential. Many doctors, especially those with families to support, would be reluctant to put their income and pensions at risk by such a move. It would also not be much help for those working for non-foundation trusts.

Many doctors have spoken of their desire to move to Wales or Scotland, where the new contract is not being imposed, or going further afield - to places like Australia or New Zealand, where working conditions are seen as superior. Some feel so demoralised and undervalued that they are considering leaving the profession altogether. And it has to be said that for most the level of uncertainty and upheaval would be too great: to have the desired impact, a strategy of mass resignations, combined with the formation of a doctors' agency, would have to enjoy the support and confidence of the vast majority - an unlikely situation.

In any case, wouldn't this play into the hands of those who advocate yet more 'marketisation' and privatisation? Surely it would undermine our argument that the NHS belongs to those who use its services and those who work in it. We need to adopt a course of action that strengthens our vision of what the NHS should be.

So where does the best course of action lie? The most notable factor

missing from Hunt's rhetoric has been the fact that doctors do not work in isolation: we require the services of a multitude of other NHS staff in order to do our jobs properly. So far very little has been said about the changed roles that nurses, healthcare assistants, paramedics, radiographers, physiotherapists and other NHS workers would need to play in Hunt's "seven-day NHS" scheme. Involving these workers in our fight is essential, especially as many of their contracts and working conditions are scheduled for 'renegotiation' in the near future.

Due to anti-union legislation, including the banning of solidarity strikes, we know how difficult it will be to organise any form of direct action by those employed in other sectors, but at the end of the day it is in the interests of all workers that the NHS is defended and improved. If we are to protect our conditions and patient safety, we will need others to take action on our behalf. As a first step the Trades Union Congress should organise coordinated days of protest, and workers in other unions - with members both inside and outside the NHS - should demand their leaders take whatever action is necessary, in defiance of the anti-union laws. We must demonstrate to the government that its plans are unworkable and the imposition of its conditions will not be tolerated.

There is already some support from the various unions representing NHS staff - Christina McAnea, head of health for Unison, has stated that her union and others would be ready to take action to oppose any new conditions imposed on nurses and other healthcare workers. But to turn rhetoric into action there must be pressure from rank-and-file union members themselves.

One thing is clear: solidarity with fellow workers - as well as raising political consciousness - will be the key to stopping the government and Jeremy Hunt forcing their damaging demands on the NHS and its patients. The fight is far from over ●

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 February 21, 5pm: Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and reading group. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. Study of Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary socialism*. This meeting: chapter 3 ('Parliamentarism vs direct democracy'), section 1: 'Labour and the old social order'.

Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Tuesday February 23, 6.45pm: Introduction to social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1. 'Archaeogenetics and modern human dispersals'. Speaker: Martin Richards.

Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: radicalanthropologygroup.org.

Rage against war

Saturday February 20, 12 noon: Rally, outside Leeds Art Gallery, the Headrow, Leeds LS1.

Organised by Leeds Stop the War Coalition: www.facebook.com/LeedsCoalitionAgainsttheWar/timeline.

Labour Representation Committee

Saturday February 20, 10am to 5pm: Special conference, 'The tasks facing the Labour left and LRC'. Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Organised by Labour Representation Committee: <http://l-r-c.org.uk>.

Refugees welcome

Saturday February 20, 1pm: Protest against racism against refugees. Assemble outside Centre for Life, Times Square, Newcastle upon Tyne NE4.

Organised by Stand Up to Racism North East: www.facebook.com/SUTRNE.

No to cuts

Saturday February 20, 11am: Protest against local government cuts. Assemble West Street (beside statue) for march to rally outside Gateshead Civic Centre, 12 noon.

Organised by Northern Public Services Alliance: www.facebook.com/northernpsa.

Sink Trident renewal

Tuesday February 23, 7.30pm: Public meeting. Stantonbury theatre, Milton Keynes MK14.

Organised by Milton Keynes Stop the War Coalition: <http://mkstopwar.org.uk>.

Own and control the future

Tuesday, February 23, 7.30pm: Meeting, Art House Cafe, 178 Above Bar Street, Southampton SO14. Talk: 'The cooperative movement, its roots in radical politics and role today', with Nathan Brown of Cooperantics. Free entry.

Organised by Dangerous Ideas Southampton: www.dangerousideassouthampton.org.uk/blog.

Don't renew Trident

Wednesday February 24, 7.30pm: Public meeting, Voodoo Cafe, 84 Skinnergate, Darlington.

Organised by Momentum Darlington: www.facebook.com/Momentum-Darlington-1684930141723107.

Who is watching you?

Friday February 26, 7pm start: Public meeting, Chats Palace, 42-44 Brooksby's Walk, London E9. No to state infiltration of protest groups. Speakers include John McDonnell.

Organised by Undercover Research Group: <http://undercoverresearch.net>.

Stop Trident

Saturday February 27, 12 noon: National demonstration. Assemble Marble Arch, London W1 for march to Trafalgar Square, London WC2 for mass rally.

Organised by Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: <http://cnduk.org>.

Revolutionary or dreamer?

Saturday February 27, 1pm: Public meeting, Red Shed, Vicarage Street, Wakefield. The life of William Morris.

Organised by Wakefield Socialist History Group: www.theredshed.org.uk/SocialHist.html.

Organise the unorganised

Saturday March 5, 10am: Yorkshire conference of National Shop Stewards Network, Ebor Court, Skinner Street, Leeds LS1.

Organised by Yorkshire Shop Stewards Network: www.facebook.com/Yorkshire-Shop-Stewards-Network-156443814473411.

Imperialism, war and the Middle East

Saturday March 5, 10.30am: Public meeting, Institute room, Liverpool Quaker Meeting House, 22 School Lane, Liverpool L1. Speaker: Yasmine Mather.

Organised by local socialists: study4socialism@gmail.com

Corbyn for PM

Wednesday March 9, 7.30pm: Evening out, Edinburgh Festival Theatre, 13-29 Nicolson Street, Edinburgh EH8. Line-up of comedians, singers, campaigners and poets for Jeremy Corbyn. Part of national tour. Organised by JC4PM tour: www.jc4pmtour.com.

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.

WORLD POLITICS

The global disorder of capital

Yassamine Mather introduces Alain Badiou's *Notre mal vient de bien loin*

Every day we hear new horror stories about the conflict in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries. The multinational peace talks in Munich, far from resolving things, have changed nothing and we are witnessing a considerable worsening of the situation. Hospitals have allegedly been targeted by Russia planes in support of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, while Turkey has been shelling Kurdish forces inside Syria, claiming that their association with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) makes them a legitimate target.

Of course, everybody knows that only Russian bombs cause civilian casualties, while US, Turkish, French and (on the rare occasions they have been used) UK military planes are surgically accurate and only ever hit Islamic State fighters, leaders and the like. We are also meant to believe that al-Qa'eda's branch in Syria, al-Nusra, which is supported and financed by Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries, should not be bombed because it is part of the 'moderate

opposition' to Assad.

This week Syria has accused Turkey of violating its sovereignty, repeating accusations that Turkey was backing "al-Qa'eda-linked terrorists" in the north. Saudi Arabia has landed planes in Turkey, ready to attack pro-Assad forces, while Syria's allies, Iran and Russia, have stepped up their rhetoric in support of the Syrian regime. Brigadier general Farzad Esmaili, Iran's air defence commander, stressed that, if asked by the Syrian government, Iran will "vigorously offer advisory help to the Syrian forces". Referring to speculation regarding Saudi Arabia's plans to deploy ground troops to Syria, the commander added: "Any presence in Syria without coordination with the Damascus government will be doomed to failure".

For ordinary civilians, the situation could not be worse: 35,000 Syrians are on the borders with Turkey, having fled the fierce battle for Aleppo. There are some 2.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey - tens of thousands have been trying to

reach Europe, hundreds losing their lives in the process. While IS or al-Qa'eda atrocities usually make the headlines only when the victims are western European or American, the peoples of the region - the inhabitants of Raqqa, Mosul, etc, not forgetting Tripoli - are on the receiving end on a daily basis.

The anti-war movement is, of course, right to point out that the imperialist 'war on terror', the invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, military interventions in Syria and Yemen, and the continued occupation of Palestinian lands have exacerbated the situation, creating further regional conflicts. It was correct to oppose all foreign interventions. However, none of this is sufficient to explain the more fundamental, long-term causes of the current situation. Last week both the Socialist Workers Party and the Alliance for Workers' Liberty concentrated on Russia's intervention in Syria.

However, there is more to the current disastrous situation in

the Middle East and North Africa than the simplistic arguments put forward by these sections of the British left. The most comprehensive explanation so far has come from Alain Badiou in a pamphlet widely discussed in France - *Notre mal vient de bien loin* (*Our evil comes from afar*). Here he presents a brief analysis of the current state of international capital, examining its policies, actions and relations, as well as the consequences of the inequalities we face in the world today.¹

Of course, others have made similar comments in the past. The removal of any restrictions on the movement of capital from advanced capitalist countries, where labour was becoming expensive, to countries paying lower rates and allowing fewer labour rights; only to move on a few years later to where labour was even cheaper than in the previous location, leaving behind a landscape of devastation, poverty and mass unemployment; the ability of global capital to transfer the most damaging aspects of successive economic crises to the countries of the

periphery; the constantly growing gap between rich and poor on a global scale - all this has been cited many times.

Monopoly capital continues to extract surplus profits from semi-colonies. However, it also benefits from migration, paying low wages in the host country and avoiding costs related to training and education. The use of migrants in this way also plays a significant role in reducing the strength of trade unions and undermining labour rights. The Syrian crisis will no doubt lead to continued substantial migration. However, despite the hysteria of various sections of the rightwing press, this is not a major issue for contemporary capital - just as the complete destruction of large parts of the Middle East and North Africa, and indeed the rise of IS, is of no real concern.

Badiou discusses the consequences of neoliberal capital's ravages worldwide and what he calls new imperial practices. What follows is my translation of extracts from his article, beginning with the attack in Paris on November 13 2015 ●

will deal with this mass murder as one of the many current symptoms of a serious malaise in the contemporary world, of this world as a whole, and I will try to indicate the requirements or the possible ways in which long-term healing of this malaise can be achieved, accepting that the proliferation of such events in the world is particularly violent and has dramatic symptoms.

Structure

It is the structure of the contemporary world, as I see it now, which will obviously help illuminate the challenges we face. In broad terms, we can describe three deeply intertwined themes.

First, it may seem banal, but for 30 years we have witnessed the triumph of globalised capitalism. This triumph is, firstly, most visible in the return of a kind of primitive energy in capitalism - what has been called (be it a questionable name) neoliberalism, which is actually the resurgence and new-found effectiveness of the constitutive ideology of capitalism: namely liberalism. It is not clear that the 'neo' is justified - I do not think it is going to be as 'neo' as is claimed, when one looks at it closely. In any case, the triumph of global capitalism, the revenue-generating capacity and the undisputed, shameless display of this phenomenon, the way it organises production, trade and eventually whole societies, as well as the way it claims to be the only reasonable way for the historical destiny of humanity, play a part.

Today we have a capitalism installed explicitly on a scale that is global. What defines this globalisation is not only a capitalism that has considerable power, but one that has grown to such an extent that now we can say there is a global structure: capitalism has unchallenged control of the entire planet.

The aggressive character that accompanies this extension of the dominant form of the global market is particularly spectacular. Today, throughout the world we are witnessing the destruction of what capital had previously attempted to create as a measured compromise. What I call 'measured compromise' is what was achieved, especially in the period after World War II, between the logic

of capital and other logic. The other logic could be that of state control, of concessions to the unions, of reluctance to allow industrial and banking concentration, the logic of partial nationalisation, control measures of certain excesses of private property. There was also the introduction of measures extending social rights to the population, such as giving everyone (in advanced capitalist countries) the ability to access healthcare, or limiting the private practices of the liberal professions, etc, etc.

It should be clear that the objective victory of global capitalism is based on an aggressive, destructive practice, a rational consequence of a particular system of production. We can be concerned about the low levels of resistance against these repeated destructions. In fact this resistance is actually in constant retreat. It is localised, dispersed, often corporatist, sectional, with no overall vision, no strategy and a retreat that has been uninterrupted for 30 years.

We can say that the logic of capital has been freed: liberalism is released. And this release takes two forms: globalisation - that is to say, the continued expansion of capitalism into new territories; and, at the same time, the extraordinary power of the concentration of capital. In this we see the dialectical movement of capital: it extends and, while extending, it focuses. The expansion and concentration are two modalities, absolutely related to each other: the protean (multi-faceted) nature of capital.

The concentrations are therefore continuing at the same time as privatisation and destruction are accelerating. You will all have noticed, because it has a dramatic side, the recent merger of Fnac and Darty, two supermarkets. We have here a fusion: books and fridges. The purely financial goal is clear and characterises capitalist fusion, without any interest for the public. These concentrations create financial power poles - sometimes productive, speculative; always accompanied by corruption. These poles are transnational, so they have a complicated relation to states.

All this explains the nostalgia for the reformist programme of the end of the war, forgetting that, firstly, at the end of

a world war the situation was different; secondly, the bourgeoisie did not dare expose its true nature; and, thirdly, there was a powerful Communist Party. Today, none of this exists. And the nostalgia for the social programme of the CNR [Conseil National de la Résistance] is day-dreaming: it is to be in denial about the subjective spectacular victory of global capitalism.

Weakening of states

States are ultimately today local managers of this vast global structure. They are a kind of mediation between what I have described and the particular situation defined by country, coalitions, federations ... Of course, there are also state poles, such as the United States and China.

Moreover, it is very striking that the banks themselves have become so powerful that, according to some, their downfall is impossible: they are "too big to fail", which is often said about the large US banks. This means that economic imperatives dominate state interest.

That is what I call the weakening of states. Not only have states largely become what Marx thought of them already - namely "proxies of capital" - but there is a growing discrepancy between large-scale firms and states. The power of large industrial, commercial or banking conglomerates do not coincide with the state sphere, nor even that of coalitions of states. This power of capital acts as if it was both independent from and mistress of states.

This brings me to my third point: that is to say, the new imperial practices.

Global organisation

As you know, the old imperialism of the 19th century was entirely under the control of the nation-state. Its global organisation reflected a division of the world between powerful nations, who in meetings such as the one in Berlin in 1885 made decisions about carving up Africa and dividing it like a cake. The imperial powers - France, Britain, Germany - installed metropolitan power in order to direct management of their territories, naturally with the presence of large, predatory firms

and the possible complicity of local notables. Now we live in a different era.

I am not claiming that we are at the end of imperial intervention: absolutely not. The issue is the difference in the *form* of imperial intervention. The question remains what to do to protect 'our interests' in distant lands? For example, regarding France's intervention in Mali, I was reading in a very serious newspaper that this intervention was a success, because we had managed to "protect the interests of the west". It was said exactly like that, in all innocence. So in Mali the intervention protects the interests of the west - there is no pretence that it protects the interests of the Malians. Moreover, the western military forces cut the country in two and the need for imperial interventions remains pressing, given the dimension of capitalist interests at stake: uranium, oil, diamonds, precious woods, rare metals, cocoa, coffee, bananas, gold, coal, aluminium, gas.

Fighting fund

Say what you like

The *Weekly Worker* is "the only meaningful and genuinely Marxist periodical published in this country", writes comrade EW in the note accompanying his £50 donation. Well, I'm sure many would disagree, but we appreciate the sentiment and - it goes without saying - that handy cheque. But it's not quite as handy as the one from comrade RG, who, as is his custom, wrote nothing apart from the date, his signature and "£100" on his. I reckon he likes our paper too!

Apart from those two, KL wrote a cheque for £25 and ST added £10 to his subscription, while PB handed over a £20 note at last week's London Communist Forum. There were also three PayPal contributions to this week's fighting fund - thanks go to FT (£15), TT and CN (£10 each). But that's only three out of last week's 3,432 online readers

who clicked on the button. Perhaps we should make it more prominent!

Finally, we also received £150 in standing orders, including MM's usual generous contribution of £75 and the £30 donated by TR - all of which adds up to the £390 that came in over the last seven days.

That takes our running total to £899 for February - which sounds good, but the target, as always, is £1,750, so we still need, by my reckoning, another £851 in 11 days! But that's plenty of time for comrades to get out their cheque books - and don't forget to say what you like about your paper! ●

Robbie Rix

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, send cheques payable to *Weekly Worker*, or make an online payment: Sort 30-99-64, Account 00744310.

serious has been done, except by the Kurds who live in the region. For many countries the issue is not that important. After all, Daesh is a market power, a competent and multifaceted business enterprise! It sells oil and works of art, it sells a lot of cotton, it is a big cotton-producing power. The group sells a lot to everyone, because to sell something it takes two: this is not just Daesh, but those who trade with it.

We need to define these new imperial practices - namely the policy of destroying states rather than corrupting or replacing them, and here I suggest the term 'zoning'. I propose that imperialism no longer needs made-up pseudo-countries in Africa, the Middle East or in parts of Asia: sub-national areas can actually become areas of non-nationalised looting. In these areas, imperialism will probably take military action from time to time, but it will not rely on the support of colonised states.

We cannot ignore this hypothesis. One wonders, for example, what was the intention of the expedition into Libya? Whose interests were in mind? A state was destroyed completely, an area of anarchy was created and everyone complains or pretends to complain about it, but, after all, the Americans did the same thing in Iraq, and the French in Mali and the Central African Republic. It seems to me that the complete destruction of Yugoslavia, accomplished through western intervention - and the carving up of that country into a dozen pieces, almost all very sick and corrupt - already gave the signal that zoning practices can be beneficial. In some regions, the practice was to destroy states, to replace them with practically nothing, to rely on fragile agreements among minorities, religions, various armed gangs. A Sunni state replaced by Shi'ite, or the other way round, but all these are non-state operations. This is absolutely clear. However, the consequences for the population of these countries are disastrous, and this what we must now examine.

Effects

The first striking effect of all that I have mentioned is that unequal development is unprecedented. Even the parliamentary right are sometimes worried. Mainly inequalities are so monstrous that, given the weakening of states, we do not know how to control their effect on people's lives.

At a certain degree of inequality, it is meaningless to speak of democracy or democratic standard. I recall these figures:

- 1% of the world's population owns 46% of available resources.
- 10% of the world's population owns 86% of available resources.
- 50% of the world's population owns nothing.

The objective conclusion from this, in terms of population, is that we have a global oligarchy that represents about 10% of the population. This oligarchy has, I repeat, 86% of available resources. 10% of the population that corresponds roughly to what was the nobility in the old regime. It is roughly similar. Our world returns, reconfiguring an oligarchic situation known long ago and one we have now come back to.

So we have a 10% oligarchy, and then we have an impoverished mass of about half of the world's population - the mass of the poor population, the African masses, the overwhelming majority of the Asian population. The total is about 60%. The remainder is the middle class, which shares, painfully, 14% of global resources. It is a structured vision that is rather significant: a mass of the poor, who make up half of the world population; and an aristocratic oligarchy, so to speak. And then there is the middle class, that pillar of democracy.

This middle class is mainly concentrated in the so-called developed

countries. It is a largely a western class. It embodies support for local democratic power, parliamentary powers. A very important goal of this group, which still has access to only a relatively small portion of global resources, a mere 14%, is to keep its status - not to be identified with the huge mass of the poor. This is quite understandable.

That is why this class, as a whole, is porous to racism, xenophobia, in defiance of the poor. These are ominous subjective determinations of this average mass, which defines the west at large, believing in a sense of superiority. It is well known that the western middle class is convinced that the west is, ultimately, the place of the civilised.

When we read everywhere today of the necessity to wage war against the barbarians, it obviously must be done in the name of the civilised - these barbarians form a huge mass, and the middle class does not want to be identified with this group.

All this exposes the very unique position of the middle class, especially that of the European middle class. It faces a sensitive situation. After all, it is constantly threatened by the real capitalists - it faces contradictions between itself, the middle class, and the enormous mass, which is a little distant. And it is this middle class threatened by insecurity that upholds the concept of 'defending our values'. In reality, it means defending the western way of life of the middle class: that is to say, the 'civilised section' of the population sharing 14% of the world's wealth.

This is one reason why the mass murder we are talking about tonight [the Paris attack of November 13 2015] is significant and traumatic. The act hit France, in some ways the soft underbelly of global capitalism; it struck at the heart of the 'average' mass, the middle class, which represents itself as a civilised island in the centre of the world - as opposed to the oligarchy, so small you barely see it, or the great mass of the poor, so far away you don't notice them, that surround the frames of the greenhouses around the middle class. That is why the disastrous event we experienced is presented as a crisis of civilisation: that is to say, as an attack against something that already, in its historical and natural existence, is threatened by the ongoing development of globalised capitalism, while it is still clinging to it.

Counting for nothing

These are the consequences of the dominance of global capitalism and the way it affects the population. But we must also remember another important fact. In the world today there are just over two billion people who count for nothing. They are not even part of the 50% poor. It is worse: they are counted for nothing by capital, which means that under the structural development of the world, they are nothing, and therefore, strictly speaking, they should not exist. They should not be there. But they are there nonetheless.

Why do they count for nothing? This means that they are neither consumers nor labour. Because, if you do not belong to the oligarchy, there are only two ways to exist for capital: you must be an employee and win some money, then you need to spend this money by consuming the products manufactured by the same capital. Your identity in the eyes of the dominant movement in the world today is a double identity, structured by money, as employee and consumer.

But where does this mass of people, whose contemporary world counts for nothing, exist? To understand this point, we need Marxism. Capital, and therefore its holders, only value the workforce - which means employees, workers in the companies they run - due to the fact that they can make

profits. This is what Marx calls in his jargon "extraction of surplus value". It is never certain that capital can exploit all the available labour force. There have been other periods of mass unemployment, especially in the 30s, after the great crisis of 1929. But today it seems that, even beyond the crisis that began in 2008, this mass unemployment is more structural and permanent. Globalisation may create an inherent inability for capitalism to reach its maximum extension, to enhance the form of profits it derives. And maybe it will get even worse. Maybe the profit system, which is the sole source of the dynamics of capital, faces a barrier created by its own extension, whereby it has the duty to value the entire available labour force and greatly reduce average working hours in order to be able to hire two billion people who remain stranded.

However, it cannot. Why? Because it cannot reduce working hours. And why is it that cannot reduce working hours? Well, simply because of profit production mechanisms: we know that a significant number of working hours gain additional surplus value and that, below this, profits will fall. For capitalism it is necessary to maintain the average length of the working week worldwide, at around 40 hours. At the same time there are two billion people, and probably a little more, who have no work.

You could calculate things in reverse. We could say, given the circumstances, a reasonable world government, concerned about public good, might consider it necessary to decide - as Marx imagined would happen - that the average duration of the global working time must be reduced to 20 hours. Maybe less. Obviously we would have a rapid reduction of this huge mass of people who cannot go to work, cannot become employees. Lowering working time was a central point of the reformist-revolutionary proposals of Marx, because he could see that, to wrest work from the domination of capital, workers' mass action had to be mobilised for a decrease in working hours.

This explains why whole areas of the world have been delivered to a kind of fascist political gangsterism - a situation that would not happen if billions of people did not count for nothing. If, due to a rational duration of working time, everyone was included in the figures of ordinary social relations, the conditions for banditry and human trafficking would not exist. But the combination of zoning - ie, the destruction of states by predators - and the phenomenon of the existence of millions or billions of people who count for nothing, leads to the existence of vast areas, sometimes a huge country like the Congo, subject to what can be called a gangster type of domination.

What is it about? Every type of armed capitalist firm occupies the vacant places where the state has disappeared, entrapping those left behind, especially children and adolescents, and indulging in an articulated pillage of the global market. This is what we are witnessing when Daesh sells trucks of gasoline to Turkey.

A h !
Religion!
Islam!
Yes, I will get to this. But I tell you right now: religion has always been

a pretext, a rhetorical cover, handled and manipulated by the fascist gangs. And Christianity was never outdone in this regard. Just take Spanish fascism: Franco focused on mass executions, including long after the end of the civil war, but fascism was literally glued to the Catholic religion. Armed bands of Francoites were blessed by the bishops, and there was talk of a great Catholic Spain that would replace the horrible republican Spain.

However, it was actually a question of state power and its relations with the fascists. So, frankly it is not very serious to blame Islam. Above all, the nature of gangs is to occupy a devastated terrain to install a form of profitable gangsterism, which then can appeal to young people in revolt, using colourful, varied, spiritual language. Religions, as indeed many other ideologies (including, alas, those of revolutionaries), have always been able to be combined with mafia practices. The Italian mafia itself was sponsored by and still shows allegiance to Catholicism.

But all this falls on the subjective side of our situation.

Reactive subjectivities

I would like to deal with typical subjectivities that have appeared in our time. By 'typical subjectivities' I mean forms of belief which are the consequences of the world I refer to. This is not a statement of all possible subjectivities. It is those I consider to be induced or produced by the contemporary world structure.

I think there are three: western subjectivity; the subjectivity of the desire to be of the west (which is not the same as the first one); and the subjectivity that I will call 'nihilist'. I think these three subjectivities are typical creations of the contemporary state of the world.

Western subjectivity is the subjectivity of those who share the 14% left by the ruling oligarchy. This is the subjectivity of the middle class and is also largely concentrated in the most developed countries. This is where crumbs can be distributed. This subjectivity, in my opinion, works through a contradiction. Its first element is great self-satisfaction - even westerners are very happy with

themselves, they really appreciate themselves. Here, of course, there is a history behind the arrogance: not so long ago westerners were the owners of the world. Parts of the world had been conquered by the sheer violence of the French and English, and this meant a carving up of the non-European world as a whole. What remains of this direct and huge imperial power is a representation of that era as the invention and defence of the modern lifestyle.

Where are the other two typical subjectivities? One that comes first to mind is what I call the desire to be of the west: the desire to own, to share what is represented and touted as western affluence. It is trying to mimic middle class consumption without having the means to do so. So it obviously leads to phenomena such as migration flows, as the simplest form of the desire to be part of the west. It is simply a desire to leave the devastated areas to join this famous western world, where everything is so good, where all are happy, living in modern and beautiful ease. And if we cannot go to the west, we can surrender to local dispositions: that is to say, copy, using our miserable resources, western lifestyles. We could talk a lot on this theme of the desire to be of the west, which is fundamental in the world today and has considerable effects - all of them disastrous.

The last subjectivity, the nihilistic, is a desire for revenge and destruction, and, of course, it is coupled with the departure of alienated desire and imitation. This strong desire for revenge and destruction is often expressed, often formalised in reactive mythologies, in a traditionalism that both extols and fights the western lifestyle, at times arms in hand: it is against the wishes of the west.

This is the nihilism of those whose lives count for nothing. This nihilism is apparently against the wishes of the west, yet the desire to be of the west is its hidden ghost. If the nihilist does not activate his death instinct, if he does not give vent to his aggression - at times deadly aggression - he knows that in reality he too will succumb to the desire to be of the west, which is already present in him.

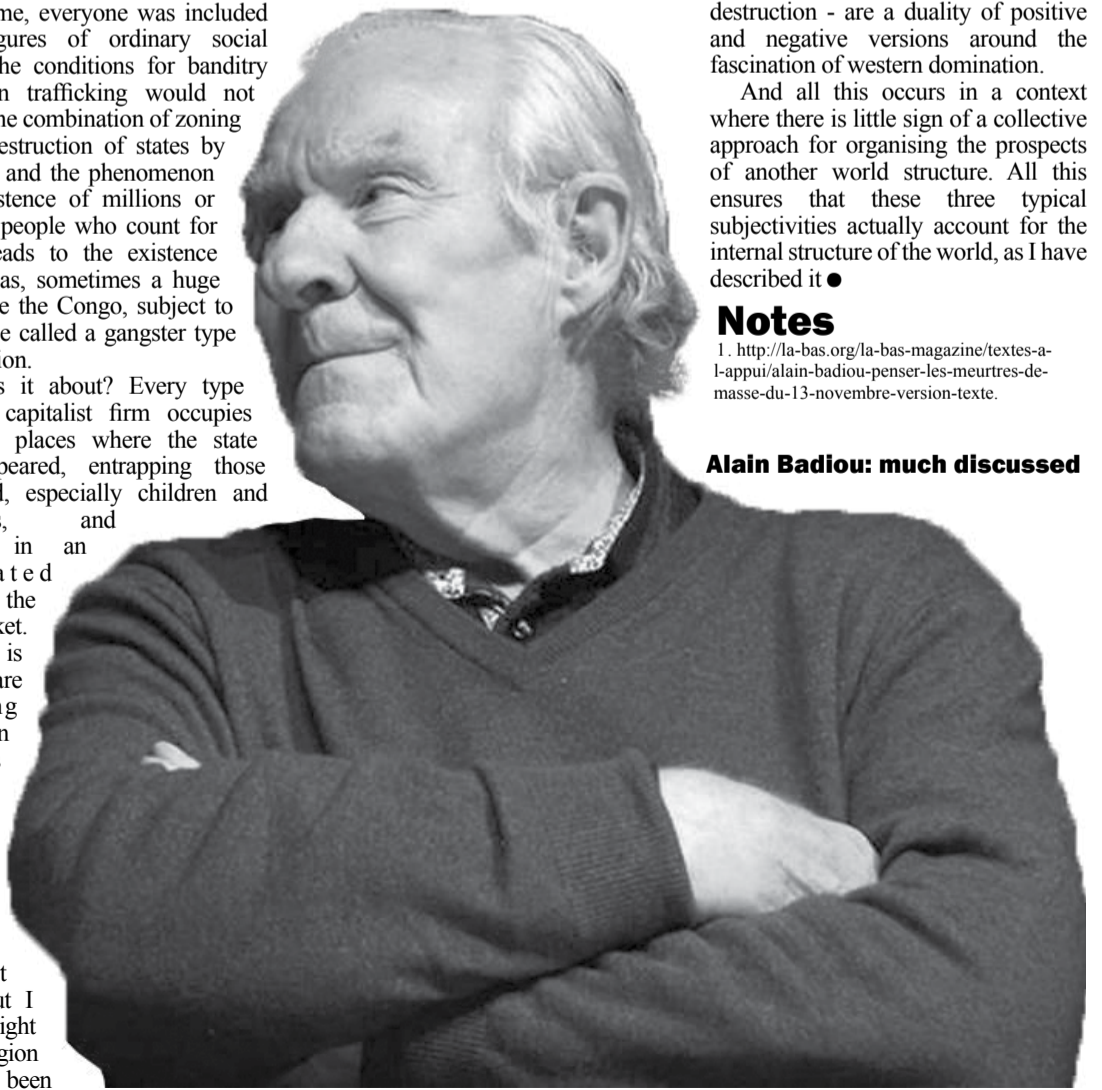
It must be understood that these two typical subjectivities - the subjectivity of the desire to be of the west and the nihilistic subjectivity of revenge and destruction - are a duality of positive and negative versions around the fascination of western domination.

And all this occurs in a context where there is little sign of a collective approach for organising the prospects of another world structure. All this ensures that these three typical subjectivities actually account for the internal structure of the world, as I have described it ●

Notes

1. <http://la-bas.org/la-bas-magazine/textes-a-l-appui/alain-badiou-penser-les-meurtres-de-masse-du-13-novembre-version-texte>.

Alain Badiou: much discussed



TECHNOLOGY

Sven Ruthner: 'Robots'

Robots and capitalism

Can new technology and artificial intelligence open up a new period of expansion for capital? **Michael Roberts** examines the possibilities and problems

In the last few years, Robert J Gordon, a professor of economics at Northwestern University, has persistently argued against the trendy view of the moment that robots, artificial intelligence (AI) and other 'disruptive technologies' are about to launch the global economy into a productivity boost never seen before.

Gordon argues that the arrival of the internet and mobile phones has failed to generate a sustained upturn in the growth of productivity. Output per hour worked in the US grew at a rate of 3% a year in the 10 years up to 1966 - after which the growth rate declined, falling to just 1.2% in the 10 years to the early 1980s. After the launch of the worldwide web, the moving average rose to 2.5% in the 10 years to 2005. But it then fell to just 1% in the decade to 2015.

A decomposition of the sources of growth in productive capacity underlines the point. Over the 10 years up to and including 2015, the average growth of 'total factor productivity' in the US - a measure of innovation - was only 0.3% a year. Productivity recently has been growing well below the 2.1% average gains seen over the past 67 years.

So, according to Gordon, the great new innovatory, productivity-enhancing paradigm that is supposedly

coming from the digital revolution is actually over already and the future robot/AI explosion will not change that. On the contrary, far from faster economic growth and productivity, the world capitalist economy is slowing down as a product of slower population growth and productivity.

Now Gordon has compiled all his ideas and retorts to those who have disagreed into a new book, *The rise and fall of American growth*.¹ "This book," Gordon writes in the introduction, "ends by doubting that the standard of living of today's youths will double that of their parents, unlike the standard of living of each previous generation of Americans back to the late 19th century." Gordon predicts that innovation will trundle along at the same pace as the last 40 years. Despite the burst of progress of the internet era from the 1990s, total factor productivity - which captures innovation's contribution to growth - rose over that period at about one-third the pace of the previous five decades.

Gordon reckons that the American workforce will continue to decline, as ageing baby-boomers leave the workforce and women's labour supply plateaus. And gains in education - an important driver of productivity that expanded sharply in the 20th century - will contribute little. Moreover, the

growing concentration of income means that, whatever the growth rate, most of the population will barely share in its fruits. Altogether, Gordon argues, the disposable income of the bottom 99% of the US population, which has expanded about 2% per year since the late 19th century, will increase over the next few decades at a rate little above zero.

Denials

It is a grim picture that Gordon paints for the future of US capitalism and thus the world. But is it right? The argument against it is that people are adopting new technologies, including tablets and smartphones, at the swiftest pace seen since the advent of the television. While television arguably detracted from US productivity, today's advances in technology are generally geared toward greater efficiency at lower costs and so will boost the productivity growth of labour.

Some argue, against Gordon, that statisticians are failing to measure output correctly, partly by failing to capture free services, such as search, which generate vast unmeasured surplus value. But, as Martin Wolf of the *FT* pointed out recently,

it is not at all clear why statisticians should have suddenly lost their

ability to measure the impact of new technologies in the early 2000s. Again, most (past) new technologies have also generated vast unmeasured surplus value. Think of the impact of electric light on the ability to study.²

Nevertheless, balanced against Gordon are a myriad of techno-optimists and economists who reckon that the world is on the brink of a productivity explosion driven by robots, artificial intelligence, genetics and a range of new 'disruptive technologies' - disruptive in the sense that traditional jobs and functions are going to disappear, to be replaced by robots and algorithms. The optimists argue that, since the time of Thomas Malthus, eras of depressed expectations like our own have inspired predictions of doom and gloom that were proved wrong when economies turned up a few years down the road.

Kenneth Rogoff of Harvard University pitched in on Gordon's predictions in a recent article.³ He agreed that there were obstacles to continuing the 'previous success' of capitalism. There was environmental degradation; growing inequality within countries; ageing populations that do not work; and the risk of financial

crashes. Yet he remained optimistic that capitalism can overcome these challenges. After all,

so far, every prediction in the modern era that mankind's lot will worsen, from Thomas Malthus to Karl Marx, has turned out to be spectacularly wrong ... despite a disconcerting fall in labour's share of income in recent decades, the long-run picture still defies Marx's prediction that capitalism would prove immiserating for workers. Living standards around the world continue to rise.

Rogoff continues that technological progress has trumped obstacles to economic growth in the past:

Will each future generation continue to enjoy a better quality of life than its immediate predecessor? In developing countries that have not yet reached the technological frontier, the answer is almost certainly yes. In advanced economies, though the answer should still be yes, the challenges are becoming formidable.

So mainstream economists remain broadly optimistic about the future of capitalism, despite Gordon's

prognostications - not surprisingly.

Gordon's main opposition comes from professor Joel Mokyr who works with Gordon at Northwestern University. What Gordon fails to account for, professor Mokyr argues,⁴ is that the information technology revolution and other recent developments have produced mind-blowing tools and techniques, from gene-sequencing machines to computers that analyse mountains of data at blistering speed. This is creating vast new opportunities for innovation, from healthcare to materials technology and beyond: "The tools available to science have been improving at a dazzling rate ... I'm not sure how, but the world of technology in 30 to 40 years time will be vastly different than it is today."

Every day there is a new story in the media about how people and their skills are being, or will soon be replaced by machines and computer software that learns for itself. At this year's World Economic Forum - the annual meeting of the global elite of bankers, politicians, corporate chiefs and military - in Davos, Switzerland, the main theme was the 'fourth industrial revolution'. Advances in robotics and artificial intelligence would have the transformative effect that steam power, electricity and ubiquitous computing achieved in previous centuries.

At Davos, the elite were told by Sebastian Thrun, the inventor of Google's self-driving cars and an honorary professor at Delft University of Technology, that "almost every established industry is not moving fast enough" to adapt their businesses to this change. He suggested self-driving cars would make millions of taxi drivers redundant, while planes running solely on autopilot would remove the need for thousands of human pilots. However, don't worry, as Thrun was optimistic that redundant roles will quickly be replaced: "With the advent of new technologies, we've always created new jobs."

As one of the most prominent observers of the new 'industrial revolution', Erik Brynjolfsson, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor and co-author of *The second machine age*, put it, "We're moving to a world where there will be vastly more wealth and vastly less work." But he went on:

I think the biggest immediate change will be a move away from ... one person [staying] in one profession or one job during their lifetime ... That shouldn't be a bad thing, and shame on us if we turn it into a bad thing.

Such optimism contrasted with the WEF's own book launched at Davos, which reckoned that increased automation and AI in the workforce will lead to the loss of 7.1 million jobs over the next five years in 15 leading economies, while helping create just 2 million new jobs over the same period. In the financial sector, a thinking, learning and trading computer may well make even today's superfast, ultra-complex investment algorithms (algos) look archaic - and possibly render human fund managers redundant. You might not care too much about the loss of hedge fund managers. But AI and robots will destroy the jobs of millions in productive sectors paying much less money. This is the prospect for labour in a robot-led capitalism.⁵

And it is not just the loss of jobs for millions that is the prospect arising from AI/robots, but some have argued that AI threatens the existence of humanity itself. Ray Kurzweil, the American inventor and futurist, has predicted that by 2045 the development of computing technologies will reach a point at which AI outstrips the ability of humans to comprehend and control

it. Stephen Hawking has argued that "the development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race".⁶ And Elon Musk, the founder of SpaceX and Tesla Motors, believes that AI is "potentially more dangerous than nukes".⁷ The "biggest existential threat" to humanity, he thinks, is a Terminator-like super-machine-intelligence that will one day dominate humanity.

Moreover, while computers are quicker, smarter and shorn of human behavioural biases, they come with their own weaknesses. Disaster can strike quickly. For example, Knight Capital, a high-frequency trading firm, imploded in 2012 when its computers ran amok, in practice losing \$10 million a minute in a devastating 45-minute trading blitz. As Gavekal, an investment brokerage, acerbically noted at the time,

Sometimes all computers do is replace human stupidity with machine stupidity. And, thanks to speed and pre-programmed conviction, machine stupidity can devour markets far faster than any human panic can achieve.

Algos based on artificial intelligence techniques may be the next generation of quantitative finance, but even industry insiders say they can unravel when confronted with the chaotic reality of markets: "This stuff in the hands of the wrong people can be very dangerous," says Tom Doris, the head of Otas Technologies.⁸ For example, self-driving cars suffered twice as many accidents as human-driven ones in 2013, according to a University of Michigan study.⁹ Most of them were minor scrapes, and the human drivers were at fault in every case, but this is a vivid illustration of how accidents can happen when man meets machine - whether on the road or in markets.

But can robots really replace humans within 30 years? Many doubt it. Scenarios such as Kurzweil's are extrapolations from Moore's law, according to which the number of transistors in computers doubles every two years, delivering greater and greater computational power at ever-lower cost.

But Gordon Moore, after whom Moore's law is named, has himself acknowledged that his generalisation is becoming unreliable, because there is a physical limit to how many transistors you can squeeze into an integrated circuit. In any case, Moore's law is a measure of computational power, not intelligence. A vacuum-cleaning robot, a Roomba, will clean the floor quickly and cheaply and increasingly well, but it will never book a holiday for itself with my credit card.

Luciano Floridi at the University of Oxford agrees that machines can do amazing things,¹⁰ often better than humans. For instance, IBM's Deep Blue computer played and beat the former world champion, Garry Kasparov, at chess in 1997. In 2011, another IBM machine, Watson, won an episode of the TV quiz show *Jeopardy*, beating two human players, one of whom had enjoyed a 74-show winning streak. But Deep Blue and Watson are versions of the "Turing machine", a mathematical model devised by Alan Turing, which sets the limits of what a computer can do. A Turing machine has no understanding, no consciousness, no intuitions - in short, nothing we would recognise as a mental life. It lacks the intelligence even of a mouse.

Floridi explains that in 1950 Turing proposed the following test. Imagine a human judge who asks written questions to two interlocutors in another room. One is a human being, the other a machine. If, for 70% of the time, the judge is unable to tell the difference between the machine's output and the human's, then the machine can be said to have passed

the test. Turing thought that computers would have passed the test by the year 2000. He was wrong. Eric Schmidt, the former chief executive of Google, believes that the Turing test will be passed by 2018. So far there has been no progress. Computer programs still try to fool judges by using tricks developed in the 1960s.

For example, in the 2015 edition of the Loebner Prize, an annual Turing test competition, a judge asked: "The car could not fit in the parking space because it was too small. What was too small?" The software that won that year's consolation prize answered: "I'm not a walking encyclopaedia, you know."

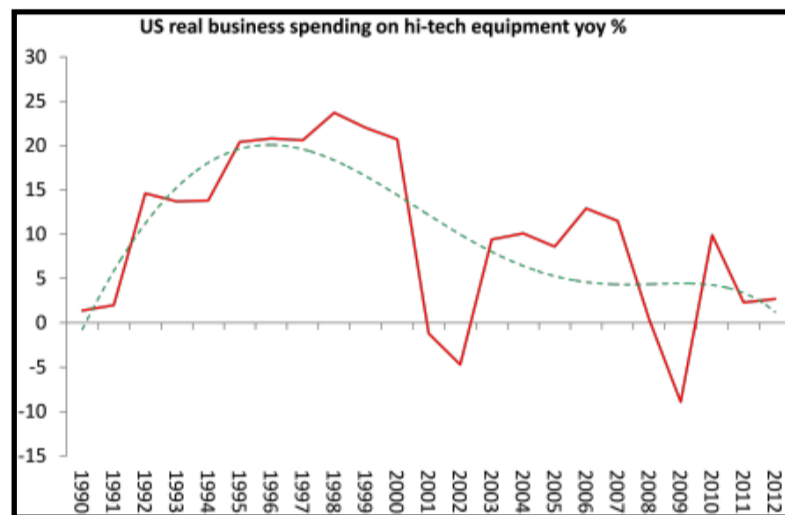
Law of value

Are we entering a new industrial revolution like the early 19th century that will give capitalism a new lease of life in developing the productive forces, even if it means loss of jobs for hundreds of millions and rising inequality of income and wealth? Or are the new 'disruptive technologies' just a mirage that will change little in increasing economic growth and productivity, as Gordon argues? I think it is both, depending on the time

encompass this secular process under capitalist accumulation. As Milanovic puts it,

In Marx, the assumption is that more capital-intensive processes are always more productive. So capitalists just tend to pile more and more capital and replace labour ... This in Marxist framework means that there are fewer and fewer workers who obviously produce less (absolute) surplus value and this smaller surplus value over an increased mass of capital means that the rate of profit [r] goes down ...

The result is identical if we set this Marxist process in a neoclassical framework and assume that the elasticity of substitution is less than 1. Then, simply, r shoots down in every successive round of capital-intensive investments until it practically reaches zero. As Marx writes, every individual capitalist has an interest to invest in more capital-intensive processes in order to undersell other capitalists, but, when they all do that, the rate of profits decreases for all. They



and the cyclical eruptions that is the capitalist mode of production.¹¹

Consider the impact of robots and AI seen through the prism of Marx's law of value under capitalism. There are two key assumptions that Marx makes in order to explain the laws of motion under capitalism: (1) that only human labour creates value; and (2) over time investment by capitalists in technology and means of production will outstrip investment in human labour-power - to use Marx's terminology, there will be a rise in the organic composition of capital.

Marx explained in detail in *Capital* that a rising organic composition of capital is one of the key features in capitalist accumulation. Investment under capitalism takes place for profit only, not to raise output or productivity as such. If profit cannot be sufficiently raised through more labour hours (ie, more workers and longer hours) or by intensifying efforts (speed and efficiency - time and motion), then the productivity of labour (more value per labour-hour) can only be increased by better technology. So, in Marxist terms, the organic composition of capital (the amount of machinery and plant relative to the number of workers) will rise in a secular fashion. Workers can fight to keep as much of the new value that they have created as part of their 'compensation', but capitalism will only invest for growth if that wage share does not rise so much that it causes profitability to decline. So capitalist accumulation implies a falling share going to labour over time, or what Marx would call a rising rate of exploitation (or surplus value).

The 'capital-bias' of technology is something continually ignored by mainstream economics. But as Branco Milanovic has pointed out, even mainstream economic theory could

thus work ultimately to drive themselves 'out of business' (more exactly they drive themselves to a zero rate of profit).¹²

Milanovic then considers robot technology:

Net income, in Marxist equilibrium, will be low because only labour produces 'new value' and, since very few workers will be employed, 'new value' will be low (regardless of how high capitalists try to drive the rate of surplus value). To visualise Marxist equilibrium, imagine thousands of robots working in a big factory with only one worker checking them out, and with the useful life of robots being one year, so that you keep on replacing robots continuously and thus run enormous depreciation and reinvestment costs every year. The composition of GDP would be very interesting. If total GDP is 100, we could have consumption = 5, net investment = 5 and depreciation = 90. You would live in a country with GDP per capita of \$500,000 - but \$450,000 of that would be depreciation.

This poses the key contradiction of capitalist production: rising productivity leads to falling profitability, which periodically stops production and productivity growth. But what does this all mean, if we enter the extreme (science fiction?) future where robotic technology and AI lead to robots making robots, to robots extracting raw materials and making everything and carrying out all personal and public services, so that human labour is no longer required for any task of production

at all?

Let us imagine a totally automated process where no human existed in the production. Surely, value has been added by the conversion of raw materials into goods without humans? Surely, that refutes Marx's claim that only human labour can create value?

But this confuses the dual nature of value under capitalism: use-value and exchange-value. There is use-value (things and services that people need); and exchange-value (the value measured in labour-time and appropriated from human labour by the owners of capital and realised by sale on the market). In every commodity under the capitalist mode of production, there is both use-value and exchange-value. You cannot have one without the other under capitalism. But the latter rules the capitalist investment and production process, not the former.

Value (as defined) is specific to capitalism. Sure, living labour can create things and undertake services (use-value). But value is the substance of the capitalist mode of producing things. Capital (the owner) controls the means of production created by labour and will only put them to use in order to appropriate value created by labour. Capital does not create value itself.

But in our hypothetical, all-encompassing robot/AI world, productivity (of use-values) would tend to infinity, while profitability (surplus value to capital value) would tend to zero. Human labour would no longer be employed and exploited by capital (owners). Instead, robots would do all. This is no longer capitalism. It is more like a slave economy, as in ancient Rome.

In ancient Rome, over hundreds of years, the formerly predominantly small-holding peasant economy was replaced by slaves in mining, farming and all sorts of other tasks. This happened because the booty of the successful wars that the Roman republic and empire conducted included a mass supply of slave labour. The cost to the owners of these slaves was incredibly cheap (to begin with), compared with employing free labour. The slave-owners drove the farmers off their land through a combination of debt demands, requisition in wars and sheer violence. The former peasants and their families were forced into slavery themselves or into the cities, where they scraped a living with menial tasks and skills or begged. The class struggle did not end. The struggle was between the slave-owning aristocrats and the slaves and between the aristocrats and the atomised plebs in the cities.

In the completely automated planet, how would the goods and services produced by robots be distributed in order to be consumed? That would depend on who owns the robots, the means of production. Suppose there are 100 lucky guys on the robot-run planet. One of them may own the best robots and so appropriate the whole product. Why should he share it with the other 99? They will be sent back to the Earth. Or they might not like it and will fight for the appropriation of some of the robots. And so, as Marx put it once, the whole shit begins again, but with a difference.

All will depend on how humanity would get to a completely automated society. On the basis of a socialist revolution and common ownership, the distribution of the output produced by the robots can be controlled and distributed to each according to his/her needs. If society operates on the basis of a continuation of the private ownership of the robots, then the class struggle for the control of the surplus continues.

The question often posed at this point is: who are the owners of

TECHNOLOGY

the robots and their products and services going to sell to make a profit? If workers are not working and receiving no income, then surely there is massive overproduction and underconsumption? So, in the last analysis, it is the underconsumption of the masses that brings capitalism down?

Again, I think this is a misunderstanding. Such a robot economy is not capitalist any more; it is more like a slave economy. The owners of the means of production (robots) now have a super-abundant economy of things and services at zero cost (robots making robots making robots). The owners can just consume. They do not need to make 'a profit', just as the aristocrat slave-owners in Rome just consumed and did not run businesses to make a profit. This does not deliver an overproduction crisis in the capitalist sense (relative to profit) nor 'underconsumption' (lack of purchasing power or effective demand for goods on a market), except in the physical sense of poverty.

Social choice

Mainstream economics continues to see the rise of the robots under capitalism as creating a crisis of underconsumption. As Jeffrey Sachs put it, "Where I see the problem on a generalised level for society as a whole is if humans are made redundant on an industrial scale (47% quoted in US), then where's the market for the goods?"¹³ Or as Martin Ford writes,

there is no way to envision how the private sector can solve this problem. There is simply no real alternative except for the government to provide some type of income mechanism for consumers.¹⁴

Ford does not propose socialism, of course, but merely a mechanism to redirect lost wages back to 'consumers', but such a scheme would threaten private property and profit.

A robotic economy could mean a super-abundant world for all (post-capitalism, as Paul Mason suggests¹⁵); or it could mean Elysium. *FT* columnist Martin Wolf put it this way:

The rise of intelligent machines is a moment in history. It will change many things, including our economy. But their potential is clear: they will make it possible for human beings to live far better lives. Whether they end up doing so depends on how the gains are produced and distributed. It is possible that the ultimate result will be a tiny minority of huge winners and a vast number of losers. But such an outcome would be a choice, not a destiny. A form of techno-feudalism is unnecessary. Above all, technology itself does not dictate the outcomes. Economic and political institutions do. If the ones we have do not give the results we want, we must change them.¹⁶

It is a social 'choice' or, more accurately, it depends on the outcome of the class struggle under capitalism. John Lanchester is much more to the point:

It's also worth noting what isn't being said about this robotified future. The scenario we're given - the one being made to feel inevitable - is of a hyper-capitalist dystopia. There's capital, doing better than ever; the robots, doing all the work; and the great mass of humanity, doing not much, but having fun playing with its gadgets ...

There is a possible alternative, however, in which ownership and control of robots is disconnected from capital in its current form. The robots liberate most of humanity from work, and everybody benefits from the proceeds: we don't have to work in factories or go down mines or clean toilets or drive long-distance lorries, but we can choreograph and weave and garden and tell stories and invent things and set about creating a new universe of wants. This would be the world of unlimited wants described by economics, but with a distinction between the wants satisfied by humans and the work done by our machines.

It seems to me that the only way that world would work is with alternative forms of ownership. The reason, the only reason, for thinking this better world is possible is that the dystopian future of capitalism-plus-robots may prove just too grim to be politically viable. This alternative future would be the kind of world dreamed of by William Morris, full of humans engaged in meaningful and sanely remunerated labour. Except with added robots.

It says a lot about the current moment that, as we stand facing a future which might resemble either a hyper-capitalist dystopia or a socialist paradise, the second option doesn't get a mention.¹⁷

In the meantime, capitalism is grappling with these new and 'disruptive' technologies. And there is still little sign of any significant return to the previous trend in business investment growth. In 2013, real spending on business investment in the US rose 3.8% - little more than half the rate achieved prior to great recession. And what is especially noticeable is that spending on hi-tech innovatory equipment - the previously dynamic, high-growth sector, with an average of 10%-20% annual growth - is very weak, now growing at a pace slower than overall real GDP.

Hi-tech spending on both equipment and software has fallen as a share from 4.7% of US GDP in 2000 to 3.5% in 2013. It is this area that is key to boosting productivity. What is the reason for this slowdown in investment in new technology? Well, it appears to be that the cost of new equipment and software is just too high relative to the realised and expected return on those investments - in other words, the rate of profit is not high enough. Indeed, as I have argued at length before, the major capitalist economies are still locked into what I call a long depression - of below-trend real GDP and productivity growth and a debt deflationary environment.

But if the end of this long depression does not lead to the replacement of the capitalist mode of production through political action from energised working class movements, capitalism will recover - as Marx said, there is no permanent crisis.

Yes, crises are endogenous to capitalism, because of the main contradiction within the capitalist mode of production: accumulation for profit and not need. But also it is possible for capitalism to recover and soldier on 'endogenously', when sufficient old capital is destroyed in value (and sometimes physically) to allow for a new period of rising profitability. Capitalism can only be replaced by a new system of social organisation through the conscious action of human beings - in particular by the majority class of people, the working class globally. Without such conscious action, capitalism can stumble on.

In the third section of Gordon's

book, he looks at why productivity growth did soar at one particularly notable juncture in the 1930s. Gordon reckons that the great depression was a period of innovation that "directly contributed to the great leap" in the 1940s. Gordon also points to the "high-pressure learning-by-doing that occurred during the high-pressure economy of World War II." World War II gave America its first jet aircraft (the Bell P-59), mass-produced penicillin and nuclear power. Perhaps even more important, factories like Henry Kaiser's shipyards taught managers and workers how to radically speed up production. Something similar could happen when this long depression ends, as it will.

Also, capitalism could get a further kick forward from exploiting the hundreds of millions coming into the labour forces of Asia, South America and the Middle East. This would be a classic way of compensating for the falling rate of profit in the mature capitalist economies. While, as unproductive labour has risen sharply, the industrial workforce in the mature capitalist economies has shrunk to under 150 million: in the so-called emerging economies the industrial workforce now stands at 500 million, having surpassed the industrial workforce in the imperialist countries by the early 1980s. In addition, there is a large reserve army of labour composed of unemployed, underemployed or inactive adults of another 2.3 billion people globally, who could also be exploited for new value.¹⁸

So there may be life in global capitalism yet, even if it is in 'down mode' right now. Or maybe this potential labour force will not be 'properly exploited' by the capitalist mode of production and Gordon is right. The world rate of profit (not just the rate of profit in the mature G7 economies) stopped rising in the late 1990s and has not recovered to the level of the golden age for capitalism in the 1960s, despite the massive potential global labour force.¹⁹

It seems that the countervailing factors of foreign investment in the emerging world, combined with new technology, have not been sufficient to push up the world rate of profit in the last decade or so, so far. The downward phase of the global capitalist cycle is still in play ●

Notes

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PRESS

The strange death of liberal media

The Independent is Britain's first major print casualty of the digital age, and probably not the last, writes William Kane

So we bid goodbye to *The Independent* and its Sunday sister, in print form at least.

Things had been looking rosy for the *Indy* and *Sindy* for a while: the current owners - father-and-son oligarchs Alexander and Evgeny Lebedev - bought the papers for the princely sum of £1, such was the dire state of things six years ago. They have since ploughed £100 million of hard-earned (by someone, anyway) cash into the titles, yet in the week the closure was announced, paper circulation was a dismal 40,000.

The *Indy* had long been kept afloat by its more nimble cousin, entitled *i* - a genuinely smart notion on the part of the Russians. The *i* is a lighter-weight affair - if not quite a classic tabloid, then at least a middlebrow offering after the fashion of the *Daily Mail*. In reality, it is something like a national equivalent to the *Evening Standard*, which became a free sheet under the Lebedevs: while the *i* has a cover price, it is a token sum, and the circulation of 270,000 provides enough eyeballs to enough advertisers for it to turn a handsome profit. Alongside lightweight copy, it benefits from republishing the output of some of the *Indy*'s more serious contributors - or at least has until now.

The sale of the *i* to Johnstone Press, which owns *The Scotsman*, was widely expected to mean the death of the main titles, now that their support system is gone. So it has proven. From late March, the *Indy* will cease to trouble the world's forests, becoming an online-only outfit.

There are doubts as to whether the website will succeed in its own right - which we will address below. In any case, the death of the dead-tree *Indy* has widely been written up as the end of a 'great experiment'. The paper is the youngest of the national dailies, founded in 1986 by three disaffected *Telegraph* staffers: Andreas Whittam-Smith, Stephen Glover and Matthew Symonds. Despite the Tory background of its founders (Stephen Glover, in particular, still writes hair-raising op-eds for the *Mail*), it quickly found its home in the soggy centre of British politics, occasionally drifting a standard deviation or two to the left or right.

In the context of the mid-1980s, this is not a huge surprise. Politics was polarised: the Thatcher government was the most across-the-board rightwing administration the country had seen since before the war, unleashing a vast offensive against the organised working class and exploiting mob hatred against gays, immigrants and blacks. The miners' Great Strike was a painfully recent memory. The Wapping dispute actually provided the infant *Indy* with its first print staff: those employees of Rupert Murdoch who looked at the move to the infamous Fortress and decided, on balance, to look elsewhere. The Labour Party was beginning its gallop to the right, but only beginning; the anti-*Militant* purge was in full flow, but those who had gotten Tony Benn to within a whisker of the shadow leadership had not exactly given up and died.

The first political result of this 'age of extremes' was the Social Democratic Party split, which saw a clique of treacherous rightists decamp from the Labour Party in the name of 'moderation', to the tumultuous applause of the bourgeois media. At the same time, the Liberal Party was finally looking like a significant force again, after its post-war nadir under Jo Grimond. By the time *The Independent*



Evgeny Lebedev: Independent dependant

made it to the news stands, the SDP and Liberals were standing together as the Alliance, and before long they were united as the Liberal Democrats.

Alternative

The Independent, in this world, was supposed to offer - within the media - an alternative to the 'tribalism' everywhere else (Murdoch's capture of *The Times* being a bad augur for those worried about the advancing influence of the 'tribes'). "*The Independent*: it is - are you?" ran the marketing material. It was supposed to be free of party-political bias and proprietorial influence, although in reality it was neither, but took up its positions on both axes in ways that its claims could be, to vulgar consciousness, plausible. Its proprietors were, in the early days at least, journalists rather than businessmen, so its 'proprietorial influences' were at least more complicated than the competition. As for the 'party political' angle, being in essence the voice of gentle liberalism and thus of the Liberal Democrats, it could at least claim to have some independence from the two parties likely to have a meaningful contest for government.

The Independent achieved a respectable circulation of 400,000 in its early days, but was badly wounded when Murdoch launched a price war in the early 1990s. It has since struggled to regain its initial momentum, instead seeing its circulation figures degenerate to the sorry state they are in now. In the intervening years, proprietors of the old-fashioned type have come into play, not least the Lebedevs - the younger of whom has a bizarre fixation on seeing himself in print in his papers, an indignity more often inflicted upon the *Evening Standard*, but from which the *Independent* titles have hardly been spared. Evgeny is evidently more comfortable with the Tory-supporting *ES* than *The Independent*, and last year the paper's electoral advice amounted to a forlorn hope for the continuation of the Tory-Lib Dem coalition. Appropriately, the Liberal Democrats' return to electoral near-oblivion has

been followed rapidly by the closure of *The Independent*.

The paper is, of course, merely at the sharp end of a long-term transition in the press, as the traditional media outlets struggle to make their own way in a world where more and more people consume news primarily in digital rather than physical form. However, we do not buy the gabble of the techno-utopians that the age of the 'traditional' media is over: indeed, we would doubt that many of the techno-utopians would be able to sell that particular prospectus in 2016. Yet the rise of the web, and latterly the various mobile 'walled gardens', has - as the tech industry jargon goes - disrupted those media violently.

At the root of the problem lies money, which is a coarse but necessary angle from which to examine both the dead-tree-to-digital transition and the complicated history of the *Indy*. The latter, after all, was put on notice by the aforementioned aggressive pricing of *The Times*, made possible in the last instance by the much larger revenues well-positioned print outlets could expect from advertising than from circulation sales. The paper itself was a loss-leader - the real money came from ads.

As it is in the world of dead trees, so it is online. From the perspective of the humble journalist, to be sure, the online advertising world has certain practical advantages. Here is how print advertising works: the paper sets aside a certain amount of space for ads. The sales team haggles with giant corporations, selling a half-page, a full page and what not - or would sir like to pay extra for a wrap-around cover? - to particular advertisers. It is good, dishonest money, but it comes at an editorial price. Say your newspaper is the *Financial Times*. Say it runs a piece critical of Hewlett Packard, and that HP is a major advertiser; and that HP's 'director of marketing and communications' complains. What do you do?

Well, it turns out that if you're the *FT* in this situation, you run an article by the original journalist excoriating

the said PR wallah in public.¹ Very good - except that not everyone does (and we rather doubt the *FT* behaves with such integrity all the time). The *Telegraph* has recently gained infamy for its pliability, when it comes to major advertisers, particularly HSBC. The proximate cause for the closure of the *News of the World* in 2011, meanwhile, was a collective boycott of advertisers. This is a more important phenomenon than is commonly acknowledged, for it allows the press to act as a collective mouthpiece for capital, rather than merely a vehicle for the influence of one particular 'proprietor'.

Yet it can only do this because of the sales people.

Techno-utopian

On the web and other online platforms, advertising works like this: your web page sends a bunch of possibly useful data, along with details of the slots on the page, to an ad server. The ad server offers the slots up for bidding to a series of other automated systems, which use their own heuristics to decide whether to buy. These systems in turn then look at the available data, and decide which ad to send to the page. At no point in this process is any human involved. In this situation, if an HP advert turns up next to an article critical of HP, there is precisely zero point in the PR guy emailing the website; because the website has no more control over the ad servers than the brand. A boycott is simply ruled out, for practical purposes. Thus one of the great disciplinary influences on the bourgeois press is neutralised - for the time being.

That is the upside for a journalist. The downside is that the digital advertising rates are abysmal. The ad servers I mentioned above are not great in number. Google controls a vast amount of the market on its own. When such monopolies arise, everyone orbiting them gets squeezed dramatically. One must guarantee a certain amount of eyeballs looking at the page for the deal to be worth it; and thus even the 'quality' press is driven towards shallow sensationalism

to make the numbers add up. A disaffected *Indy* staffer is currently being widely quoted as describing the paper's website as a clickbait operation (that is, a news outlet that uses cheap tricks to get page views); but we could also cite the *Mail Online*, which is half composed of the lunatic conservative ramblings we so love in the print edition, and half of smutty pictures of frequently underage celebrities. (It is also, terrifyingly, the most popular news website in the world.)

So we find it difficult to credit the dutifully bullish noises emanating from the Lebedevs and their lieutenants. They have spent a lot of money and effort keeping hold of the paper's star columnists - notably Middle East specialists Robert Fisk and Patrick Cockburn. They promise to cut down on the clickbait and turn the website into something a serious newsreader would actually want to visit. Yet it is surely far too late. The emergence of new media inevitably takes a toll on their immediate predecessors - the *Indy* is the first casualty of what will no doubt be many.

Indeed, the greatest surprise in *The Independent*'s downfall is perhaps merely that it beat *The Guardian* to the cemetery. The latter paper has been bleeding money at worrying rates for years. It refused, throughout the Alan Rusbridger years, to even consider anything so boorish as asking people to pay for the website, even while investing a great deal of money in its digital profile; it seems that a new software engineer is hired for every two hacks and subs it lets go. If I were a vulture, I would be winging my way to Kings Place in short order.

The grain of truth in the techno-utopian idea is that a significant shift in media power is happening; yet the only certainty, as long as capitalism persists, is that the power currently wielded by the Lebedevs and Murdochs will only be transferred to a newer, shinier oligarchy ●

Notes

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POLEMIC

Bakuninist hatchet job

Mike Macnair takes issue with Dave Douglass over the First International

On December 10 2015 this paper published Dave Douglass's rave review of René Berthier's *Social democracy and anarchism in the International Workers' Association 1864-1877*.

The review led me to buy and read the book myself. I thought it was potentially interesting, since I have argued myself in *Revolutionary strategy* (London 2008, chapter 2) that the 'mass strike strategy' of the 'Bakuninist' wing of the First International and its successors expressed legitimate concerns about electoral strategies leading to corruption of the workers' representatives - although in that very outline discussion I came to the conclusion that this approach could not work. Perhaps Berthier would have more useful information and ideas about the issue?

Alas, it was not to be. Berthier's book is merely a hatchet job, primarily characterised by rhetoric and spin against Marx and Engels as individuals, in the service of what is ultimately a cold war idea that 'Marxism leads to Stalinism' (by pushing further the pre-1914 German 'Lefts' idea, revived by the 1950s-60s New Left, that Engels, via Kautsky, led to social democracy and Stalinism).

To this approach, traditional among anarchists, Berthier adds two specific arguments. The first is that Marx's and Engels' decisive vice was to break up the First International as a 'broad front' and convert it into a 'sect' by insisting that the workers' movement needed to participate in elections. The second is that their opponents, having saved what (he alleges) was the majority of the "anti-authoritarian international", proceeded after Bakunin's death to destroy it by the symmetrical error of voting through commitments *against* electoral participation and in favour of 'propaganda by the deed' (direct actionism).

An *appearance* that Berthier's arguments are backed by evidence is created by the presence of 372 endnotes (as well as an appendix of a selection of documents added by the translator). In reality, however, these do not do this job. The point of footnotes or endnotes in polemical historical writing (writing which is making an argument rather than merely offering a narrative), is to enable the reader to 'replicate the experiment' by going to the sources on which the author has relied to confirm or deny whether they do in fact back the point. But Berthier's most damaging allegations against Marx and Engels are simply unsupported by references.

Much of Berthier's narrative, where it is backed by references, is taken uncritically from James Guillaume's *L'internationale: documents et souvenirs* (Paris 1905-09). Since Guillaume was an immediate participant, on Bakunin's side, in the split, Guillaume is the opposite of an unbiased witness. This is not to say that he is not a witness at all: merely that he should not be used *uncritically*.

Berthier uses Franz Mehring's biography of Marx as constituting "admissions" from the Marxist camp (eg, p9); but fails to recognise in this context that, as Hal Draper has shown, Mehring was strongly influenced in his treatment of Marx in this period by his own *Lassallean* sympathies.¹ Again, this does not rule Mehring out of court as a witness; it merely means that Mehring's adverse comments on Marx's conduct cannot be used as providing strong evidence against Marx, in the way that Berthier uses them.

Draper in *Karl Marx's theory of revolution* has offered a savage critique

of the version of the story of the split in the First International which Berthier repeats. He argues that Bakunin's followers suppressed a good deal of his correspondence and that, from correspondence which *did* survive, unpublished till the 1960s, it became clear that the charges Marx and his supporters made against Bakunin and his supporters - of running an entry operation in the First International and planning a split - were substantially true.² Draper's arguments may be false - or may be the one-sided 'Marxist' equivalent of Guillaume's one-sided 'Bakuninist' arguments. But in a book written in 2012 they need an answer.

Mark Leier's full biography of Bakunin, *Bakunin: the creative passion* (New York 2006) also does not respond to Draper's arguments, but equally gives an account of the struggle and split in the international which is inconsistent with Berthier's version. Again, some response is called for in a book written in 2012.

A related, symptomatic feature of Berthier's treatment of the subject is his handling of the roles of the 'Lassallean' German General Workers Association (ADAV) and the 'Eisenacher' Social Democratic Workers Party of Germany (SDAP) - groups which were, in 1875, to fuse to form the precursors of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). These groups' lack of commitment to the International are used as evidence that the 'Marxists' did not have a majority (p74).

Marx's and Engels' criticisms of Ferdinand Lassalle (for playing political footsie with rightwing Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck), and of Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel of the SDAP for 'Kleinstaateri' (calling for socialism in one small country) and for failing to break decisively with the Saxon liberals, are treated not as in any sense calling into question Marx's and Engels' supposed commitment to electoralist reformism and bourgeois coalition politics, but are used rather merely as evidence of their isolation (p89).³

On the other hand, the flirtations between the ADAV and the International in the early 1870s are not used to interrogate how far the "anti-authoritarian international" was acting in a principled way (given that the ADAV, unlike Bebel and Liebknecht, voted for war credits for Bismarck's war with France in 1870), but merely as more evidence of the 'breadth' of the "anti-authoritarian international" (p129).

'Fantasy organisations'

Dave Douglass says: "The 'federalist' concepts around Bakunin and the international forces he represented were anathema to Marx and his team, who responded by expelling practically the entire affiliated international membership." In saying this he is pretty faithfully paraphrasing Berthier. The problem, however, is that Berthier does not actually supply any evidence for this view, except for the fact that the "anti-authoritarian international" lasted longer than the 'Marxist' version - though on his own account it rapidly got very small, so that this might mean merely that the 'Marxists' were first to give up on what was, on both sides, plainly a dying project.

The true answer is probably that we do not know who had the majority in 1871-72. The First International at its height was numerically dominated by British trade unionists and French Proudhonists, with other groupings relatively marginal. The 1867 Reform Act drew the British trade unions

towards Liberal Party politics, while the fate of the Paris Commune and Marx's support for it in *The civil war in France* repelled them; the French movement as a whole, Proudhonists included, was crushed by the repression in the wake of the Commune. Under the circumstances the majority of the International had been lost, and it would have been extraordinarily difficult to ascertain what, if anything, the mandates of congress or conference participants represented.

Precisely in order to reject the charges (of running a secret split faction) on the basis of which Bakunin and Guillaume were expelled at the Hague, Berthier argues that Bakunin tended to create "fantasy organisations" without real memberships and the 'Marxists' improperly exploited this against him (pp9-11, 75-77). But, once it is conceded that Bakunin before (and into) the period of the First International created fantasy organisations without real memberships, we cease to have any grounds for believing the claims about the number of members backing them made by Bakunin's supporters in the period of the split and afterwards.

Why *did* the "anti-authoritarian international" collapse? Berthier's story (pp131-51) is partly one of nasty, sectarian manoeuvres by the Germans; partly one of the 'anarchists' (as opposed to the revolutionary syndicalists) imposing a political line on it. But the narrative he gives also suggests rather strongly that the Belgians, who were a major component, were from the mid-1870s more attracted to the 'German' 'electoralist' line.

This is, of course, the other side of the story of the German ADAV and SDAP: in spite of Marx's and Engels' criticisms of the 1875 Gotha unification, it triggered a 'snowball effect' which turned two groups, with around 20,000 in total membership, into a much larger organisation, serious enough to be (partially) banned by the Anti-Socialist Law in 1878. Moreover, Bebel and Liebknecht had abstained rather than voting for credits for Bismarck's war in 1870; so a Social Democratic MP could chart a line independent of the regime of parliamentary manoeuvres. (Electoral) political action now looked like a basis on which to build serious organisations.

I make these points not in order to reach the opposite conclusion - that Marx and co were the 'true majority' (as Draper does) - but merely to establish that *Berthier's argument*, here following Guillaume, is unsound, and that the book is generally characterised by rhetorical spin. There are numerous other points of the same sort which could be made, but I do not have either space or time to "joyfully take time to pick it apart", as Dave Douglass puts it.

The question which is posed, however, is why it is worthwhile in 2012 for Berthier to do a 'spin doctor operation', claiming that the ideas of Marx and Engels led to social democracy and Stalinism, when even a sympathetic early 21st-century biographer of Bakunin (Meier) does not carry criticism of Marx and his co-thinkers to this length. Why does this split in a (fairly short-lived) international workers' organisation 144 years ago still *matter* to us?

The answer is, fairly straightforwardly, that the actual *political* issues in the split - as opposed to questions such as who had a majority, whether Bakunin was running a secret faction, whether Marx was engaged in bureaucratic manoeuvres (or was a pan-Germanist) or whatever - are still live in the 21st century. Is it true that "electoralism" (ie, running serious

campaigns for election to bourgeois parliaments) and attention to issues of constitutional design necessarily lead to bureaucratic control and corruption by the capitalists? If so, does revolutionary syndicalism - building broad-front, pure trade unions, with a 'revolutionary' minority group working within them - represent a workable alternative strategy?

Indeed, we are not only concerned with the revolutionary syndicalism of the sort Berthier defends, or that of the old Industrial Workers of the World. The reality is that, if we read Berthier, his interpretation of Bakunin is strikingly close to the ideas of the modern 'revolutionary' and 'Trotskyist' left. Against 'electoralism' - check. For 'broad fronts' and against taking any decisions which might *conceivably* lead to a split - check. For a 'revolutionary minority', operating clandestinely or semi-secretly within the 'broad front' (or presenting themselves in public, not as group supporters, but of the delegates of this or that front organisation) - check. All of these attitudes are shared by the Socialist Workers Party and other groups, including those operating within the majority in Left Unity.

'Original sin'

In this context, looking either for a 'Marxist' original sin from around 1870, as Berthier does, or for a 'libertarian' original sin from the same period, as Hal Draper did, is rather unhelpful. *Both* the 'Marxist' and the "anti-authoritarian" versions of the First International collapsed in the short term. What we have to do is, rather, attempt to abstract from the immediate issues in debate to the underlying principles - and this Berthier *rightly*, but not accurately, attempts in his first chapter, 'Key questions' (pp12-63) - and then look at the success or failure of the rival perspectives *with the benefit of hindsight over the whole period between c1870 and today*.

We have to look with the benefit of hindsight, as I argued in *Revolutionary strategy*, because the exercise is not about passing moral judgment on our predecessors in the movement. It is more like the sort of activity an engineer has to do when a bridge falls down. *Why* did it fall down? What changes can we make to prevent its replacement suffering the same fate?

However, the underlying issues are, it seems to me, two. The first is whether 'electoralism' should be rejected as tending to lead to corruption by capital (not, Berthier argues, in favour of anarcho-terrorist direct actionism, but in favour of revolutionary syndicalism). The second is the question of 'broad fronts' and the 'invisible dictatorship' of the small group of those who have theoretical superiority.

As to revolutionary syndicalism as a superior alternative to electoralism, it seems that the evidence is unambiguously that it is not. The 'non-political' British trade unions between their various breaks with the First International and the beginning of

Labour formed a political tail to the capitalist Liberal Party. The phenomenon of anti-political trade unions ending as tails for the dominant political party forces was displayed again in 1930s Spain with the anarchist-led Confederación Nacional del Trabajo forming a tail to the People's Front government; in the US with the unions and the Democratic Party; and in 1950s Bolivia - to give only one 'third world' example - with the syndicalist leadership of the Central Obrera Boliviana and the left-nationalist Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario. In pre-1914 Germany, the material base of the 'revisionist' right wing of the SPD - and the *first* part of the SPD to agree to support the war effort in 1914 - was the trade union leaderships. In 1914 France, the majority of the syndicalists of the Confédération Générale du Travail, originally a revolutionary syndicalist organisation (James Guillaume worked for its press from 1909) backed the 'war effort' just as promptly ...

As to 'broad fronts', it is plainly untrue that making elementary political choices (eg, whether to stand in elections) prohibits the creation of large mass organisations. Consider the German SPD, but equally the mass communist parties of France, Italy and so on at their height.

On the contrary, the idea that it is necessary to preserve the broad character of the front by avoiding basic political decisions *requires* the presence of Bakunin's 'invisible dictatorship'. When the SWP, Socialist Resistance or whatever hide their party affiliations behind front organisations and vote against their own views for fear of imagined split dangers, the result is to poison internal life and create an atmosphere of suspicion. The end result is splits and *not* the creation of mass organisations.

Berthier's interpretation of the history of the First International, then, does not provide us with a useful guide - either to the past or to the future ●

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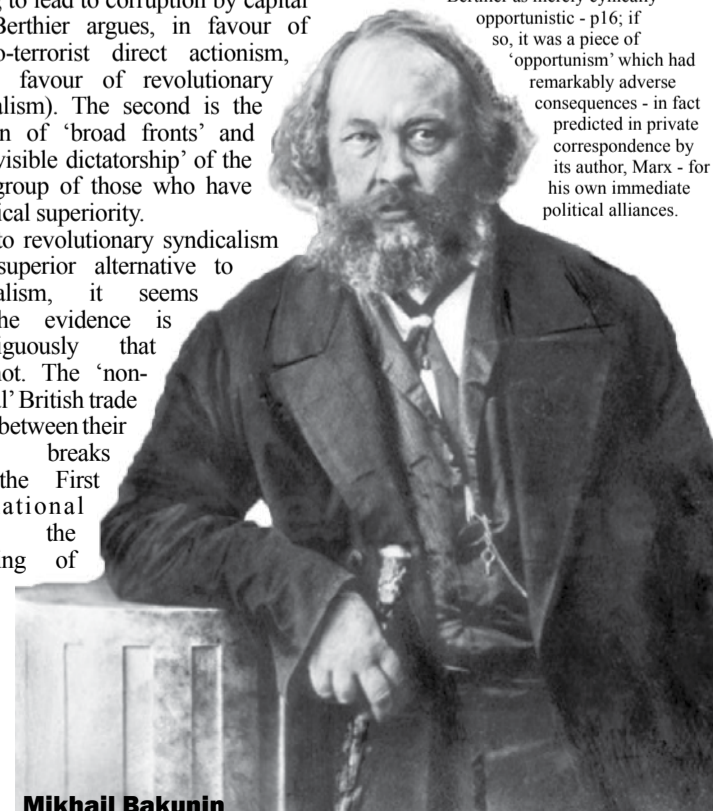
Notes

1. H Draper *Karl Marx's theory of revolution* Vol 4: *Critique of other socialisms* New York 1990, special note C.

2. *Ibid*, special note B.

3. The material in question is contextualised in RH Dominick III *Wilhelm Liebknecht and the founding of the German Social Democratic Party* Chapel Hill 1982.

4. *The civil war in France* is characterised by Berthier as merely cynically opportunistic - p16; if so, it was a piece of 'opportunism' which had remarkably adverse consequences - in fact predicted in private correspondence by its author, Marx - for his own immediate political alliances.



Mikhail Bakunin

REVIEW

Just a writer of women's fiction?

Rachel Cusk *Outline* Vintage, 2014, pp249, £8.99

Despite being shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, 2015, Cusk is potentially more than a 'women's writer'. But we shall have to wait and see. In an interview with Lynn Barber for *The Observer*, back in 2009, she revealed that she is angry about "men, marriage, children - I don't know, everything".¹ Then she added that, as a mother of two girls, she is "loathed by other mothers, attacked with slings and arrows from every side". Her novel *Arlington Park* (2009) "seemed to express a hatred of almost all aspects of family life". Oh dear!

It is a pity really, because she has this amazingly acute insight into the lives of others, which at the same time, reveals more and more about herself. Like Flaubert - a worthy template - she values writing as a craft. In *Outline* she has created many fascinating, imaginative images, rendered in precise, beautiful prose. It moves effortlessly from the present to the past, and back to the present; from the viewpoint of the story-teller to the other characters, and back again.

Despite her limited world view, Cusk might possibly have helped to create a new form: the auto-biographical novel: ie, a postmodernist variation of modernist realism. On the one hand, she writes autobiographical fiction, which is largely plotless (compare the realism of Ulysses), via the narrator's chance encounters with strangers (eg, a fellow passenger on a plane to Athens). On the other, she goes beyond the realism of Joyce or Woolf. She does not merely copy the latter's technique of interior monologue or streams of consciousness. Rather hers is based on the narrator's own story (a middle class woman like herself), but a story which is rooted in sensuous reality. The writing is closely observed, detailed, palpable (whether she is describing the plane journey or a trip to the beach in the Greek high summer, as a respite from the stifling Athenian heat), whereby the narrator's voice (herself once removed), her feelings, thoughts and attitude are fused - albeit in a fluid, dialectical manner. They segue between herself and others, including anecdotes which she picks up through chance encounters along the way.

The stories which emerge are tragicomic, and sometimes stand as extended metaphors: the man sitting next to her on the plane, who maintains contact with her in Athens (thereafter referred to as "my neighbour"), relates his life story to her (centred around three marriages and divorce); in particular the macabre mix-up concerning the burial of his parents. At her writers' group (which is the purpose of her visit to Athens), one student tells her a story about some friends, whose panel in the kitchen ceiling had an ominous crack in it. Come the usual violent summer thunder storm over Athens (which I myself have experienced at first hand), the ceiling suddenly collapsed on a dinner party, drenching all concerned. (Is this an intimation of the political/social crisis engendered by Greek austerity, which is touched upon elsewhere, if only briefly?)

Another student relates the story about a family which acquires an untrained puppy with a voracious appetite. It was bought for some spoilt, ungrateful children, who soon abandon all responsibility for its care to their mother; whereupon it is regularly beaten by this increasingly exasperated woman. (But would she also slap her children when they misbehave?) That story reaches its climax when the unfortunate dog devours a birthday cake, which is bad for all concerned, especially the dog!

The first assignment of the 10-strong writing group is to tell a story about



Rachel Cusk: an original talent

what happened on their way to class; whereupon the 10th person rounds on the narrator, accusing her of abdicating her responsibilities as a teacher. (Maybe here Cusk is having a dig at one aspect of her own career: she is also an established writer in residence, centre-piece of one of those expensive "creative writing courses", ritually advertised in the review pages of *The Guardian*.)

Given Cusk's innovative narrative technique (so the novel is not quite dead yet), it is unfortunate that she limits her realm of reality to bourgeois marriage/the bourgeois nuclear family (which is clearly shown to be in disarray), wherein the currently popular discourse on gender politics is always lurking in the background. In this sense she and her peers have regressed from the world view of their 19th century predecessors: eg, Balzac or Flaubert. They, of course, radicalised the concept of realism - they were the pioneers of modernist literature. By so doing, they showed an ability to criticise their own class from within (ie, as acute observers of the hypocrisies and social mores of the bourgeoisie). Hence Both Marx and Engels were drawn to such writers, heaping critical praise upon them in the process.

Admirer

Cusk is also an admirer of DH Lawrence. But why? They come from very different backgrounds. He was working class and then an erstwhile member of the middle class; otherwise he settled for exile and the role of wandering sage. She comes from a wealthy Catholic family. Cusk's *The last supper* (a travelogue about a summer in Italy, published in 2009) begins with a quotation from Lawrence:

"Comes over one an absolute necessity to move ... I'm in awe of how much DH Lawrence managed to get around." But is that the limit of her admiration for this controversial writer (compare those bourgeois feminists who ensured, for politically correct reasons, that he has long since been evicted from the literary canon)? No, there is more: "DH Lawrence is a good example [of a writer from the wrong side of the tracks] who think they want acceptance, but actually they can't stand it and they've got to annoy people by pointing out uncomfortable things, and that's more me."

But what about Lawrence's view, *à la* Rousseau, that modern industrial society - ie, capitalism - is based on the paralysing effects of the "division of labour", the increasing mechanisation of all forms of human activity, the engulfing of "quality in quantity";² so that, as the literary critic, WW Robson, says, the "right kind of human naturalness, showing itself in a play of emotional spontaneity and mobility and a capacity for tenderness [in a man] whose form of life grows from that 'life centre', without which Lawrence thought modern living was mere automatism ..."³

(As Marx and Engels say in the *Communist manifesto*, in terms of the historical dialectic it is the human male who is affected most by the vestiges of the old society; albeit in due course, the bourgeoisie destroys "all feudal patriarchal idyllic relations"⁴, though it prostitutes everything, having resolved personal worth into mere exchange value. But, with the arrival of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie will be swept away, in part thanks to the nihilism of modern capitalism itself.)

Apart from her published novels (of which *Outline* is the latest), Cusk has also written a new (somewhat loose) translation - of Euripides' play, *Medea*, which was performed at the Almeida in late 2015. (Note, here she has turned to a classical Greek drama which is more personal than political. It is a play about the breakdown of a marriage and the mother's desire for bloody revenge - ie, infanticide - unlike *Antigone*, which is a political drama about the conflict between the individual and the state.) One can only hope that, in her future work, like Flaubert *et al*, Cusk will endeavour to broaden her canvass, to include the whole ensemble of class relations (whilst not, of course, feeling obliged to see the world from the standpoint of the proletariat!). Combined with her undoubted talent for innovative writing, then she might become a *truly* radical and worthy novelist for the 21st century - rather than being pigeon-holed as a 'writer of women's fiction'!

Nevertheless, *Outline* is a wonderfully refreshing novel, which should appeal to everyone. This applies whether or not you decide to take it as a holiday read on your next visit to Greece - whilst sparing a thought for the Greek people themselves, especially the working people, considering what they have been through of late! ●

Rex Dunn

Notes

1. www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/30/rachel-cusk-lynn-barber.
2. To quote Mikhail Lifshitz's paraphrase of Hegel: M Lifshitz *The philosophy of art of Karl Marx* London 1973, p14.
3. www.utgju.ro/revista/lit/pdf/2011-01/7_MINODORA_OTILIA_SIMION.pdf.
4. Once again using Lifshitz's phrase: *op cit* p103.

What we fight for

- Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.
- There exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.
- Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members should have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.
- Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question - ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.
- Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'.
- The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.
- Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.
- Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.
- The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote.
- We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.
- Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.
- Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.
- Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.
- Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

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weekly Worker

**Legalisation
is logical
and rational**

Drugs are not the problem

Prohibiting legal highs marks an escalation in the crazy 'war on drugs', says **Eddie Ford**

In a welcome move, Tim Farron, leader of the Liberal Democrats - or what is left of them - has called for the legalisation of cannabis (currently classified as a 'class B' drug) and a cessation of the 'war on drugs', or at the very least a ceasefire. At the upcoming Lib Dem spring conference, he will endorse a motion which calls on the party to extend its existing support for the legalisation of cannabis for medicinal use, to include recreational use as well.

The motion has been prompted by the release of a report from a panel commissioned by the Lib Dems to examine the financial implications of legalising cannabis. Looking at evidence from US states like Colorado and Washington, where cannabis use has now been legal for several years, the panel estimated that legalisation would save the criminal justice system between £200 million and £300 million - not something to be sniffed at. One of those consulted was professor David Nutt, one of the world's leading neuropsychopharmacologists and a former chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. He famously got the sack for doing his job and presenting the government with *facts*, as opposed to propaganda, pointing out that *statistically* ecstasy was no more dangerous than an addiction to horse-riding.¹ In 2009 he published a pamphlet highlighting how the perfectly legal drug, alcohol, was more harmful than the entirely illegal LSD, ecstasy and cannabis.²

Anyhow, Farron urged David Cameron to rediscover his "backbone" and make the case again for "drugs reform" - a reference to his previous support for the 'medical' prescribing of heroin and the provision of safe injecting rooms. In December 2002 he told MPs that such places "at least get heroin users to a place where they can be contacted by the treatment agencies, so that the work of trying to get them off drugs can start". Yes, it was the *same* David Cameron who is now prime minister - one of the generals conducting the unwinnable 'war on drugs'.

Farron's 'pro-cannabis' stance puts him in the same company as the "really boring" non-user, Jeremy Corbyn, who in 2000 backed an early day motion in the Commons declaring that the "cannabis battle in the war against drugs is being lost". Corbyn added that cannabis is "neither more damaging than tobacco, nor more addictive than alcohol, and ... it is no more the portal to harder drugs than a half of bitter to rampant alcoholism". Apart from that, it should be "decoupled" from hard drugs in the public mind, because it has "therapeutic value" (MS sufferers, Parkinson's Disease, Crohn's disease, glaucoma treatment, epileptic control, PTSD, asthma, etc).³ The motion stated that councils should be allowed to hand out Amsterdam-style licences to cannabis growers and people who wanted to open cannabis cafes.

More recently, in last year's Labour leadership debates, 'historic' users Andy Burnham, Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall said they would "consider" decriminalising cannabis, but Corbyn went one stage further - "we should be adult and grown up": ie, decriminalise



Criminalisation will quickly close them

cannabis. Interestingly, in 1989 he backed the introduction of a smoking ban in public venues, 17 years before it was finally introduced. There is nothing inconsistent or hypocritical about Corbyn's position, as some stupidly allege - quite the opposite, if anything. Both are matters concerning *public* health and general societal well-being.

Illegal highs

However, we have to say to both Farron and Corbyn - what about the other drugs that are presently illegal? Should they not be legalised too? In that way, just as with alcohol or food products, *quality control* can be introduced - such as clear labelling, which would detail the composition of the drug concerned and provide guidelines about its use. That is the logical and *rational* thing to do.

Meanwhile, totally bypassing logic, the government is very near to banning all legal highs - significantly escalating the 'war on drugs' and guaranteeing more casualties. Previously, there had been a legislative loophole enabling ingenious chemists in 'grey market' labs to create substances that produce very similar effects to popular street drugs like cannabis, ketamine and ecstasy - but with a different chemical signature, meaning they can be openly sold in 'head shops' (and on the internet, of course).

Two weeks ago the Psychoactive Substances Bill passed its final stages in parliament and is expected to become law by April. The new legislation outlaws the *supply and production* of legal highs, or novel psychoactive substances (NPSs), but not those who buy or consume it - thereby creating

yet more contradictions and anomalies in the law, not to mention more police work.

Those defending the move cite evidence that some cannabinoids synthesised in chemical labs are 100 times more powerful than traditional strains - like methoxetamine (MXE), trading under various names, including 'Black Mamba' and 'Pandora'. They refer to the 2013 death of two party-goers - supposedly after taking the then legal stimulant, mephedrone ('bubble').⁴ Research carried out by Northumbria University found that the main market for legal highs were disadvantaged young people, prisoners and the homeless - hardly a blinding discovery perhaps, but still indicative.

Naturally enough, the legislation has been criticised for containing too broad a definition of psychoactive substances - described as something "capable of producing a psychoactive effect in a person who consumes it" by "stimulating or depressing the person's central nervous system, affecting the person's mental functioning or emotional state". Readers may think this is a pretty accurate description of alcohol, nicotine or caffeine - all of which, strangely enough, are exempt from the bill, alongside "any substance which is ordinarily consumed as food". Somewhat amusingly, at the end of October Theresa May wrote to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs informing them that homeopathy - a practice based entirely on pseudoscience, involving sugar pills with no active ingredient - would be specifically excluded from

any ban. Talk about wanting your psychoactive cake and eating it. But the ineluctable problem is that there is no *direct* mapping between molecular structure and mental experience, which no amount of chemical testing - no matter how well intended or rigorous - can definitely ascertain or quantify. Ultimately, the only way of knowing if a substance 'alters the mind' is by trying it.

Scrutinising the bill, the home affairs select committee recommended that nitrous oxide ('laughing gas') should be "reviewed" by the ACMD to consider whether it should come under the remit of the new bill, and also concluded that poppers (alkyl nitrates) should not be banned, since their misuse was "not seen to be capable of having harmful effects sufficient to constitute a societal problem". Poppers are widely used by gay men to relax muscles, making sex easier and more pleasurable - whilst others just enjoy the brief high they give. Making the headlines, Crispin Blunt, the Tory MP for Reigate, 'outed' himself as a regular poppers user and attacked the government's "fantastically stupid" plan to ban the drug - in this he agreed with the view of the Gay Men's Health Collective that a ban on poppers could increase the use of 'class A' and 'class B' drugs as well as the transmission of sexually transmitted infections. Stonewall, the gay equality campaign, has also spoken out against the move, saying it could put the health of gay and bisexual men "at risk". Yet the government still insists on a ban, irrespective of the evidence or facts. The war must go on.

Michael Linnell, founder of DrugWatch - a forum for drugs workers and professionals - expected legitimate retailers to start selling off their remaining stocks of NPSs at "big discounts" ahead of the ban. After that, obviously, the trade will continue *underground*. After all, as Linnell says, "it's important to remember it's a market, so for a lot of people it doesn't really matter whether it's illegal or not". All that matters is the desire for the drug and how to get hold of it: someone, somewhere, somehow will always be willing to supply it.

Crazily, we now have a situation where some of the most dangerous drugs are legal, whilst some of the least harmful are banned, and where many of the most acute dangers from drug use arise from their very illegality. Illogical, captain. At least if you buy your legal high from a shop you have some sort of comeback - unlike with a black market dealer, who might well tell you anything to get you to buy the stuff. Legal highs should remain ... legal - and be

properly regulated.

Opium

Recently the BBC featured a report about an unemployed young man on a rundown council estate, who took legal highs in an attempt to stave off depression - and unfortunately died, possibly as a direct result of the drugs. Apparently, if you take away his drugs he will become happy about being unemployed and having a generally shit life.

This is an utterly inhuman approach - and, what is more, one that can never work. No, we remember Marx's famous phrase about religion being the "opium of the masses". What he meant, of course, despite the many deliberate attempts to misunderstand him, is that when you are living under conditions that make you *suffer* you turn to something - or anything - that will make the pain go away, even if only temporarily: ie, religion. Therefore the *very last* thing Marxists propose, apart from the authoritarian likes of the Blanquists or Enver Hoxha, is to declare war on religion - to take away people's opium and then expect them to be happy. We fight to change the *conditions* that lead to suffering and misery, and only then will religion begin to wither away. From this rational perspective, religion is most certainly not the main problem or the cause of all evil in the world - the tiresome accusation of bar-room liberals or Richard Dawkins on a bad day.

The same goes for drugs. Many of us *regularly* take a certain drug - ie, alcohol - occasionally to regretful excess. Not necessarily because we are unhappy, but because we *enjoy* it, and what is wrong with that? We want people to take drugs because they are happy or satisfied, not because they are miserable or cannot get a job. Drugs should be *socialised*, not further restricted or criminalised. Communists are not so naive, it goes without saying, to think that legalisation would instantly solve all our drugs problems or magically usher in nirvana - a perfect society of blissfully happy, non-alienated, individuals. But *all* the evidence tells us that harmful drug-taking, of whatever nature, is best dealt with on the non-punitive societal level rather than treated as a matter of criminal pathology or individual moral failure deserving of punishment ●

Notes

1. <http://jop.sagepub.com/content/23/1/3>.
2. www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/Estimating%20drug%20harm.pdf.
3. www.parliament.uk/edm/2000-01/12.
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