

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity



# weekly **worker**



**Rex Dunn gives his input  
to the debate on Marxism,  
biology and gender ideology**

- Letters and debate
- Ireland: divorce
- Iranian protests
- Lessons of ISO

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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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# TWO NEO-NASTIES



## LETTERS



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

## Confirmatory

The European Union elections were more or less irrelevant and a distraction from the battle against a Tory Brexit. They were, of course, useful to assess the state of public opinion, but not for deciding strategy and tactics. Paul Mason saw the results and draws the wrong conclusions. He argues that Labour must shift further to the right to embrace the liberal position of "remain and reform, and the call for a second referendum on any deal" (*The Guardian* May 27).

He thinks that, "Given the scale of the reversal, it looks likely that the Labour right will launch a new leadership challenge against Corbyn. They may wait until after the Peterborough by-election and the announcement of a formal probe into alleged anti-Semitism by the Equality and Human Rights Commission."

Yet getting smashed in an election that nobody expected, and with a low turnout, suggests people understand reality. It was an opportunity for Faragean grandstanding, not least in offering to join the next EU negotiating team, whilst saying there is nothing to negotiate. Paul Mason says that "Labour supporters have to look reality in the face" - before he himself fails to do so.

The Corbyn Labour Party has rightly pitched its tent on the 'remain'-democrat hill as the party of 'remain' which accepts the 2016 result. On this little hillock it subsequently constructed a small fort, from which to resist a Tory Brexit. These fortifications are not strong enough and will eventually be overrun.

However, so far general Corbyn has been able to keep his parliamentary army relatively united to beat off the Tory Brexit and push the Tories to dump May. His greatest hits have included the 2017 general election that wrecked May's parliamentary majority, then three defeats of the Tory Withdrawal Agreement and finally halting the decision to leave on March 29. Corbyn can take the lion's share of the congratulations for enabling the people to vote in the May 23 European election.

His leadership of Labour's divided party allowed the people to have this confirmatory referendum. Not surprisingly, an angry public confirmed they did not like it. They decamped *en masse* to the rival protest parties for ultra-Brexit or ultra-'remain', often encouraged by Labour members.

Still this is no time to race round like corporal Jones, shouting 'Don't panic, Mr Mainwaring'. But panic ran away with Emily Thornberry and Paul Mason. All the mainstream media cheered and demanded that Corbyn abandon his little fort on the hill and join them in the valley of death. Let cowards flinch and traitors sneer, but it is time to stick to the 'remain'-democrat position for the next stage of the battle, with a tweak or two.

Labour had eight million 'remain' voters and four million leavers in 2017. If you want to stop Corbyn winning the next election, then you must drive a wedge between these two sets of voters. This is exactly what the ultra-remainers are trying to do, including many socialists such as Paul Mason, Another Europe and the Alliance for Workers' Liberty acting as the 'useful idiots' for the liberals, who all want a 'remain' referendum

and a 'reformed' (sic) EU.

Corbyn's confirmatory referendum confirmed what we already knew. Not much has changed since 2016. Unlike the last time, nobody agreed to carry out the 'will of the people'. Westminster will continue with the same deadlocked parliament as before, with a new Tory prime minister. None of those new European MEPs will be in the Commons, where the next battle will take place in September.

The one most important lesson from this confirmatory referendum is that up to two million EU citizens were again denied a vote. History was repeating itself. If the ultra-remainers were serious, they would be calling this out. The result should be declared illegal. All democrats should recognise this was gerrymandered by incompetence, duplicity and inefficiency. By making the democratic case against this 'referendum', we remind everybody about the deliberate exclusion of EU residents from the last one.

*The Guardian* reports that Corbyn has shifted a little. He says: "Labour will support a second referendum on any Brexit deal." We have not had a first referendum on any Brexit deal, never mind a second one! But at least this goes beyond holding a referendum only on a 'bad' deal. He should remember Northern Ireland and Scotland voted to remain in 2016.

Corbyn says: "Labour's preference would be for a general election, but any Brexit deal has to be put to a public vote" (*The Guardian* May 28). I agree with that. If he doesn't go beyond ratification, then he is still on his little hillock in his small fort - and not with Paul Mason in the valley of death, with the rest of the light brigade.

Steve Freeman  
London

## Lance the boil

I think Steve Freeman is capable of making a virtually unanswerable argument in favour of a further referendum to decide the terms of the United Kingdom leaving the EU (Letters, May 23 - as in most editions of the *Weekly Worker* since 2016).

Given that 'the people' were asked to decide 'leave' or 'remain' in 2016, when faced with a choice as to which body should approve the terms of leaving (the government using the crown prerogative, parliament or the people), the democratic answer surely has to be 'the people'. The fact that the current 'deal' 'negotiated' by the present Conservative government - or the very marginally different offer from the Labour Party - is not what anyone can have voted for in 2016 makes the argument for a further ballot even stronger.

I agree with Steve that to 'respect the result of the 2016 referendum' means to offer people a choice between leaving on 'the deal' (or any other significant variant) or leaving without a deal. I was genuinely shocked when I first started to hear People's Vote advocates saying the choice should only be between 'leave' on the current deal or 'remain'.

What about the 17.4 million people who thought they were voting to leave the European Union (and that must have included the single market, customs union and the jurisdiction of the court of justice), and would be denied that option under a People's Vote? People may not have used that terminology (it was probably Andrew Neil who first started to notice and flag the inherent component parts of the EU and catch politicians out who were unaware of the overlaps and distinctions

between the concepts), but I am sure that if you asked 99 out of 100 people who voted 'leave', their reasons for doing so would be incompatible with remaining in the single market and/or customs union.

However, if you do go back to the people, I think you do have to include an option to remain. A refresh of the democratic mandate cannot exclude either the 48% or the 52%. People have the right to change their minds - 2016 is a while ago now and a lot has happened and changed since then. And if as consistent democrats (which communists should be) we argue that sovereignty rests with the people, then the exercise of that sovereignty must be allowed to choose between all the principal available options - and then instruct the elected parliament and therefore the government to get on with the detail and deliver.

Ideally Theresa May should have got on and implemented the main content of her January 17 Lancaster House speech, when she said that leaving the EU also meant leaving the single market, customs union and court of justice, but seeking the best possible relationships with the EU and component nations going forward. But even here there were elements of blurring, talking of "the greatest possible access to the single market" and "a customs agreement with the EU" - which, of course, also happens to be Labour Party policy.

The 2017 House of Commons appears completely incapable of either resolving the current impasse or acting to deliver the sovereign will of the people. The breakdown of parliamentary party discipline - with unprecedented numbers of Conservative and Labour MPs abandoning the manifesto commitments on which they were elected and deciding to exercise their personal individual views of what 'the national interest' is and how it should be served - has meant the current Commons increasingly fails to reflect the popular will, inasmuch as it ever did. It only serves themselves as individual MPs.

I simply do not understand the Labour position of preferring a general election, but, if they don't get one, then accept the need for a referendum. These are two fundamentally different processes and ask two fundamentally different questions. A general election would ask if the electorate want a Labour government with Jeremy Corbyn as prime minister - and with no real clue at the present time whether the manifesto would be for 'remain' or 'leave'. A separate referendum could allow Labour not to take a binding view on the EU, but simply pledge to implement the result.

The long awaited, but incredibly inopportune, Tory leadership electoral process means the UK is heading rapidly towards the October 31 exit from the EU - not only with no agreement, but with no active decision to leave without an agreement and therefore no real planning for such an exit.

No agreement is different from no deal. An agreement is required to exit the EU and decide what arrangements will continue and what will change. Without an agreement all the preplanning in the world cannot anticipate every eventuality. There are a million and one things that can go wrong - and bureaucratic inertia, incompetence or even sabotage will make sure something goes wrong.

Just remember the fuel tanker protest in 2000 under the Blair government and how quickly Britain ground to a halt and entered a pre-crisis situation. Blair in his

autobiography is clear and explicit that he was on the brink of calling in the troops to get the tankers moving and the fuel flowing, and he talks about the orders he would have given them. What do you think would have happened to any drivers or the leading organisers if they tried to resist?

Yes, the Conservative Party may well be "annihilated" as a result of a "crash-out" (Jeremy Hunt, speaking on May 28), but so will the Labour Party - they will be seen as complicit and not a cigarette-paper worth of difference in policy from the Tories.

In answering 'What is to be done?', politicians - even communists - do not have the luxury of saying we wouldn't start from here. If we were (suddenly) in control, what would we do? It's a fair question. I do not see how we can or should avoid taking the question of the EU back to the people, with clear options to leave without a deal, leave with a deal (eg, including the single market and/or customs union) or remain. Clearly, such a referendum should either be in stages or use a single transferable vote system to produce a new majority. I suspect the first option would win through, but that is just my guess. There is a local joke that Kettering is leaving, come what may ...

People are frustrated and angry and not in a good way. We urgently need to lance the EU boil once and for all.

Andrew Northall  
Kettering

## Song and dance

I was surprised at the venom of Richard Farnos's attack on Amanda MacLean in last week's *Weekly Worker* (Letters, May 23). I think her articles have been interesting and quite sensible - but what do I know? I wouldn't recognise a salmonid gonad if it got up and bit me! His letter reads as if MacLean was totally unaware of any political events going on in the world and with, in my view, no just cause for that assertion.

He cites the Caster Semenya case, which I believe is tragic for the lady involved and for the many of her colleagues who have come to her support. I suspect that the International Association of Athletics Federations were moved more by financial considerations (as usual) than by any sportswomanship.

But surely Farnos's point is undermined by the fact that there are in athletics, and almost all sports, different disciplines for men and for women. Though any half-fit woman could no doubt run faster than me, even when I was young and relatively fit, there is no woman alive who could cover 100 metres faster than Usain Bolt has managed. Similarly, we could construct normal distribution curves for height, strength, facial hair, voice range and even testosterone levels in men and women and they would, to differing degrees, overlap - but not coincide.

At the same time I believe that I can spot a woman or a man in the street, in a workplace or even across a crowded room and would make a correct identification almost every time, and the person I identify would self-identify as such. There may be a spectrum somewhere, but almost all men, including gay men, would identify themselves as men and almost all women, including lesbians, would identify as women.

Any person not falling into this neat binary world is entitled to the same respect and empathy as

anybody else, but I don't see the need to make a big song and dance about it. I bet that, for instance, Chelsea Manning and Angela Davis would get along together fine.

Jim Cook  
Reading

## Cuba and Trotsky

I am a long-time supporter of the Cuban Revolution, having joined the Trotskyist movement in Canada only just before the July 26 Movement worked its seeming miracle by taking power - inspiring me for the balance of my life. I've been active in the movement since then and helped found and grow the Canadian Fair Play for Cuba Committee!

In fact I couldn't restrain myself from bolting off to Cuba in 1961 and landing in Havana on the eve of the Bay of Pigs invasion, spending some time incarcerated as an unknown tourist in a house in Miramar and a couple of weeks in the cosy confines of La Cabana. Released, I got no help from the Canadian embassy as a known partisan of Cuba.

I've been back many times since and plan to continue visiting - I heard about the conference you reported ('Neither kings nor bureaucrats', May 23) and was amazed by it: my comrades, Ernest Tate and partner, wrote up a very good report. (Trotsky would have been delighted too, of course, that the spirit of 1917 was lit again in the Americas - of course, where else would it have shone so brightly?)

I'm now looking forward to visiting Havana and attending a future Trotsky tribute conference - if I can be accommodated - just to show Trump and co how close to our hearts the revolution is!

Thanks for your excellent article and excellent journal!

John Darling  
Toronto

## Read and study

In addition to the *Weekly Worker*, I also subscribe to *The Socialist*, *Socialism Today*, *Socialist Appeal* and *The Chartist*.

I read *The Socialist* - weekly paper of the Socialist Party in England and Wales - because I like reading its editorials and reports of party members' involvement in campaigns, especially trade union struggles. I read *Socialism Today* (SPEW's monthly magazine) because I like finding out what Peter Taaffe (general secretary) and his closest supporters in Britain and internationally are thinking.

I read *Socialist Appeal* (fortnightly paper of the International Marxist Tendency) because I like its editorials and reports of supporters' work within the Labour Party. However, as it has over 200 supporters, I am baffled as to why it's not a weekly paper. I read *The Chartist* bi-monthly magazine because it provides information as to what soft-left Labour Party members and trade union officials in the Anthony Crosland social democratic tradition are thinking.

In the past, I have subscribed to *Socialist Worker* (weekly paper of the Socialist Workers Party), but stopped doing so after it became obsessed with the need for an 'anti-racist' struggle to combat the 'fascist threat'. I would like to subscribe to the *Morning Star* (daily paper of the Communist Party of Britain), but, given my limited resources, I can't afford it.

I take Lenin's advice to all Marxists to read and study the left press, very seriously. Other readers of the *Weekly Worker* should do the same.

John Smithee  
Cambridgeshire

# IRELAND



Their influence is waning

## Out of the dark ages

While the divorce referendum has resulted in a marginal improvement, writes **Anne McShane**, the absence of a fighting working class is still making itself felt

**T**he overwhelming vote - 82.1% - in favour of liberalising divorce in the May 24 referendum illustrates the changed nature of Irish society. Éamon De Valera must be spinning in his grave.

The architect of the 1937 constitution, De Valera dominated Irish politics from 1921 up until 1973, when he retired as president. As an arch-Catholic, he wanted the church to govern every aspect of private life, and to confirm the patriarchal family as the mainstay of the state. Article 41 to this day asserts that the family is “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society” - a “moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law”.

For women this meant domestic slavery - “by her life within the home, woman gives to the state a support without which the common good cannot be achieved”. And the state will “endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home”.<sup>1</sup> In fact from 1933 until 1973 married women were prohibited from working outside the home. The ‘marriage ban’ meant that the majority of women had their contracts of employment officially terminated on marriage. My mother’s generation were prevented from having any life outside the home. Of course, they took on cleaning and child-minding to make ends meet, but they were denied the right to any official position in the workforce.

Unsurprisingly the 1937 constitution also included a ban on divorce - a ban that lasted for almost 60 years. An attempt by Fine Gael/Labour to remove the ban in 1986 was met with threats of hellfire and damnation. Statues of the Virgin Mary in villages were claimed to have moved in an ominous warning of the destruction to come. Crowds gathered at grottos in the hope of witnessing such miracles, and the church’s work was done: the electorate rejected divorce by 63.5%. Broken and loveless marriages were covered up and people were forced to live in misery. True, in 1989 legislation was introduced allowing for judicial separation, but it forbade the right to remarry.

By the early 1990s Ireland, a bastion of traditional Catholicism, was the only country in Europe where divorce was still illegal - a source of great pride for pope John Paul II, who had been welcomed by a crowd of over

2.5 million people on his visit in 1979. A minor breakthrough came in 1995, when the constitution was amended after a referendum to allow divorce in very restricted circumstances - where the couple could prove they had been lived apart for four out of five years. The proposal barely scraped through, with 50.28% for and 49.72% against, amid warnings from church officials that divorce was “unCatholic” and would lead to instability in Irish society. Catholics who got divorced or remarried were told that they could be denied sacraments, such as communion and confession.

Those warnings still mattered in 1995. But the hold of the church was being eroded. The publication of reports revealing systemic abuse of those in the care of the clergy - in state-funded establishments - led to massive anger. We learned through official reports that women in homes for unmarried mothers had been tortured and shamed, and their children were stolen from them. Many of these children died in dubious circumstances or were put into homes. Children in state care and people with disabilities were also subjected to shameful discrimination and physical and sexual abuse. Then there were the cover-ups and the lies.

It was apparent that the Catholic church had no right to be the moral guardian of the people. It was a malign force, which had been systematically abusing the most vulnerable in society. Attendances at mass collapsed in the late 1990s and have not recovered. And even those who still attend often no longer follow the church’s rules.

But there has also been European integration, economic change and urbanisation - we are no longer a nation of small farmers. Ireland has come more to resemble other European countries like France, Italy and Portugal, where religion is marginal to everyday life. In 2015 same-sex marriage was introduced by referendum and in 2018 the “right to life of the unborn” was finally removed from the constitution and abortion legislated following a decades-long struggle, culminating in a referendum. This represented a hugely significant victory for women’s rights and a major blow against the power of the church to determine the way that people live their lives.

However, in contrast to the huge controversy in 2018, this year’s divorce referendum barely raised an eyebrow. It was expected to pass without

difficulty and I am not surprised by the margin of victory. The 1995 legislation was a nightmare for men and women seeking a divorce. To have to wait for over four years for a conclusion to an unhappy marriage caused great torment. And to have to prove that you have actually been living apart - ie, not under the same roof - is financially crippling for couples unable to sell their homes without a divorce. So the new legislation is only a marginal improvement in that respect - only two out of three years living apart! Divorce should be immediately available on the request of either party - the state has no right to determine how long people should stay married.

There are plans ahead to amend the constitution still further to remove the most offensive sections of article 41 on the role of women. And more and more people are taking an à la carte attitude to their Catholicism. Many parents still have their children baptised, and there are also communion and confirmation ceremonies, but these now have more the form of rites of passage. In fact many friends and relatives choose to go only to the ‘after party’ rather than the church.

But, despite the positive growth of secularism, economic and social conditions are worsening. So, while a slightly more liberal access to divorce is welcomed by many, the problem is that many couples cannot afford to separate. There is a major housing crisis in Ireland and the cost of housing is astronomical, with property prices increasing by over 80% since their low point following the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. In Dublin prices have gone up by 92% since 2013. Refusal to invest in social housing has meant that private landlords have had a field day, and rents have more than doubled. Of course, there are plenty of empty properties and plenty of rentals for tourists, but very little for the 10,000 homeless at the present time. People remain in the same house because they cannot afford to move on. Divorce is often a luxury - painful and expensive.

Ireland has changed. But not under the leadership of the working class. We still have to put our mark on this society and ensure working class people can demand what we need both politically and economically. Legal rights are meaningless without the ability to enjoy them ●

### Notes

1. www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html/article41.

## LONDON COMMUNIST FORUM ACTION

**Sunday June 2, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and reading group: study of August Nimtz’s *Lenin’s electoral strategy from 1907 to the October Revolution of 1917*. This meeting: chapter 3 (continued): “‘Revolutionary parliamentarism’ for a new International”. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk) and Labour Party Marxists: [www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk](http://www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk).

**Radical Anthropology Group**  
**Tuesday June 4, 6.30pm:** Series of talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taverton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1. This meeting: ‘God, climate change and farmers in rural Punjab, Pakistan’. Speaker: Stephen Lyon. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: <http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

**Iran: 1953 roots of 1979**  
**Friday May 31, 5pm:** Lecture, Investcorp auditorium, St Antony’s College, Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2. Speaker: Ervand Abrahamian. Organised by University of Oxford Middle East Centre: [www.facebook.com/MiddleEastCentreOxford](http://www.facebook.com/MiddleEastCentreOxford).

**Stop the far right across Europe**  
**Saturday June 1, 1pm:** International forum, NEU, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. Speakers from anti-fascist organisations across Europe debate why the far right is on the rise and how to stop it. Organised by Stand Up To Racism: [www.facebook.com/events/1448957158579543](http://www.facebook.com/events/1448957158579543).

**Trump and transition**  
**Saturday June 1, 12 noon:** Seminar, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. ‘Are we entering a new stage of the post-World War II crisis?’ Speakers: Hillel Ticktin and Mick Cox. Organised by Critique: *Journal of Socialist Theory*: [www.facebook.com/events/244323086439093](http://www.facebook.com/events/244323086439093).

**Seven Men of Jarrow**  
**Sunday June 2, 10am:** March. Assemble Jarrow Town Hall, Grange Road, Jarrow NE32, for parade led by Follonsby Miners Lodge to commemorate the miners’ strikes of the 1830s. Organised by Follonsby (Wardley) Miners Lodge Association: [www.facebook.com/events/816295315385155](http://www.facebook.com/events/816295315385155).

**No to Trump state visit**  
**Tuesday June 4, 11am:** Protest. Assemble Trafalgar Square for march through central London. Organised by Together Against Trump: [www.facebook.com/events/447620012676970](http://www.facebook.com/events/447620012676970).

**Stop the London arms fair**  
Events organised by Campaign Against Arms Trade.  
**Saturday June 15, 12.30pm:** Network organising meeting, St Hilda’s East Community Centre, 8 Club Row, London E2. Planning the mobilisation against the global arms trade in London in September. [www.facebook.com/events/432514417493720](http://www.facebook.com/events/432514417493720).  
**Saturday June 22, 11am:** Training session, Bridge 5 Mill, 22a Beswick Street, Manchester M4. Skill up to stop the DSEI arms fair. [www.facebook.com/events/591596081307911](http://www.facebook.com/events/591596081307911).

**Bargain books**  
**Saturday June 15, 11am:** Book sale, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.facebook.com/events/318713752161574](http://www.facebook.com/events/318713752161574).

**Justice for Grenfell**  
**Saturday June 15, 12 noon:** March. Assemble Portland Place, London W1. Solidarity with the victims of the fire two years on. Demand justice and action now. Organised by Justice4Grenfell: [www.facebook.com/events/581265065709901](http://www.facebook.com/events/581265065709901).

**Miners’ strike 35th anniversary**  
**Saturday June 15, 1pm:** Rally, Orgreave Lane, Sheffield S13. Demand truth and justice for miners brutalised by police at Orgreave in 1984. Speakers include Matt Wrack (FBU) and Steve Hedley (RMT). Organised by Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign: [www.facebook.com/events/2016964828402260](http://www.facebook.com/events/2016964828402260).

**Definitions of socialism**  
**Thursday June 20, 6pm to 8pm:** Study session, Jack Jones House, 2 Churchill Way, Liverpool L3. Organised by Merseyside Socialist Theory Study Group: [study4socialism@outlook.com](mailto:study4socialism@outlook.com).

**Derby Silk Mill Rally**  
**Saturday June 22, 10am to 4.30pm:** March, rally and festival. Assemble Market Place, Derby DE1 and march to Cathedral Green. Celebrate Derby’s historic general strike of 1833-34. Organised by Derby Silk Mill Rally: [www.facebook.com/events/232199550654799](http://www.facebook.com/events/232199550654799).

**Stop Trump in Latin America**  
**Thursday July 4, 6.30pm to 8.30pm:** Rally, Unite House, 128 Theobalds Road, London WC1. Speakers from Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil and Bolivia. Entrance by free ticket. Organised by Venezuela Solidarity Campaign: [www.facebook.com/events/379649595978779](http://www.facebook.com/events/379649595978779).

**National Shop Stewards Network**  
**Saturday July 6, 11am to 5pm:** Conference, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Join trade unionists and anti-cuts campaigners to debate how we take the fight forward in the workplaces. Entrance £6. Organised by National Shop Stewards Network: [www.facebook.com/events/377609106411016](http://www.facebook.com/events/377609106411016).

**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.

## TORIES

# Their crisis, our opportunity

Boris Johnson promises to deliver Brexit, but to do that means calling a general election, writes Eddie Ford

**S**o far 11 Tory leadership candidates have thrown their hat into the ring. Of course, the contest is taking place in the context of Brexit and a constitutional crisis that, as can be seen with the local and European Union elections, is threatening the very survival of the Tory Party.

The former saw the Tories lose 1,330 councillors on only 28% of the vote, whilst in the latter they came a humiliating *fifth* with a wretched 9% vote share - Nigel Farage's Brexit Party romped home on 31.6%, the resurgent Liberal Democrats were second at 20.3%, Labour trailed behind them on a fairly miserable 14.1%, while the Greens were on 12.1%. Then there are the parties that could well be destined for history's dustbin very soon: the pro-'remain' Change UK registered 3.4%, and the far-right UK Independence Party 3.3%.

Or, if you want to look at it in a different way - as many have - anti-Brexit parties (including the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru with 3.6% and 1% respectively) collectively took 40% of the vote, compared with the combined 35% for the Brexit parties - a win for 'remain'! However, if you count the Tories as pro-Brexit, and Labour as a *sort of* 'remain' party, you get a messier picture. Either way, there is no discernible majority when it comes to a second referendum.

Many commentators, including myself, were expecting the prime minister to resign straight after the European results came out - which everybody knew would be terrible. But what killed her in the end was the planned fourth attempt to get her deal with the European Union approved by parliament, which this time round was to include a provision allowing MPs a vote on a second referendum - which would be binding upon the government.

In reality, Theresa May had been a dead woman walking since the calamitous 2017 general election. Against all the expectations of the Labour right and the media, Jeremy Corbyn ran a highly effective campaign that gripped the imagination of very many in the country - inspiring them to back Labour in their droves. Corbyn effectively won that election, not Theresa May, which meant that David Cameron's working majority of 17 was replaced by a minority government dependent upon the tender mercies of the Democratic Unionist Party.

Making things worse, Theresa May stupidly gave herself an impossible hand to play - yes, 'Brexit means Brexit'. That was a sensible enough thing to say in order to attract Ukip voters and turn them into Tory voters. But, when trying to pin down what the slogan actually meant, she said it was a rejection of the customs union and single market, while also retaining an open border on the island of Ireland - a literal impossibility, as you cannot have it both ways. That inevitably led to the so-called 'backstop', alienating her hardline Brexiteers and the right of the party in general.

Frankly, under those circumstances, with a 'remain' majority in the House of Commons, but disaffected Brexiteers as well - the numbers never added up. The first 'meaningful vote' on her EU deal was lost by 230 votes in the biggest defeat in parliamentary history, though the margin of defeat went down in the next two votes. But, if the fourth had gone ahead, the scale of defeat would probably have been



**A lie, obviously, and now he faces the courts**

back to the level of the first vote. We have seen several years of paralysis and crisis, which could well continue - the establishment has no cunning plan to leave Brexit behind and 'reunite' the country.

### After Theresa

What is important to remember is that most of the candidates are not actually serious contenders to lead the Tory Party - James Cleverly? Kit Malthouse? Esther McVey? Rather, they are jockeying for position and striving for a plump post in the cabinet - not to mention laying the groundwork for a more serious challenge in the future.

Looking at the odds, Boris Johnson is the favourite with the bookies on a 38% probability of becoming leader, followed by Michael Gove and Dominic Raab on 18% each.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly though, when we examine the race according to a tally of MPs who have *openly* declared support for one of the candidates, the story is slightly different.<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Hunt comes out on top with 28 supporters and Boris Johnson a close second on 26, with Michael Gove snapping at their heels on 25 and Dominic Raab getting 22. Obviously, this picture could change - having to appear before the crown court to face allegations of misconduct while in public office could not come at a worse time for Johnson. However, he still looks like the person to beat - sorry, Kit Malthouse, even if you do think you are "the new face with fresh new ideas". But we have to remember that the first ballot is for MPs only and it is just the top two candidates who go before the entire membership. In reality that could be the biggest hurdle Johnson has to overcome, as there is a substantial bloc of Tory MPs who want to keep him off the membership ballot at all costs.

Then again, do not dismiss the possibility that we could get yet another *coronation*, as with Theresa May, bypassing the Tory rank and file altogether - with one person emerging as the clear favourite and the others simply standing down, on the basis that they do not want to go on the BBC

and engage in a damaging debate, or tour the country exposing their many divisions. Whatever the machinations of the 'Anyone but Boris' campaign, Johnson might find himself in that fortunate position.

Wasting no time, the former London mayor declared that he intends to take the UK out of the EU by the October 31 deadline. This provoked a stinging response from Jeremy Hunt, the current foreign secretary, who warned that the party would be committing "political suicide" if it tried to push through a no-deal Brexit against the expressed wishes of parliament - that could trigger a general election, which could put Jeremy Corbyn in No 10 "by Christmas". Hunt also fear that the Tories would be "annihilated" and "face extinction" if there was a general election before Brexit had been delivered - the European elections being an indication of what could happen.

Matt Hancock, secretary of state for health and social care, waded in behind Hunt on May 29 - pouring icy-cold water on the idea on the idea of a no-deal or 'clean' Brexit, as the "brutal reality" is that this is "not a policy choice available to the next prime minister", given the parliamentary arithmetic. This follows on from Philip Hammond's combative appearance on the BBC's *Andrew Marr show*, when he bluntly told the leadership candidates they would not "survive" any attempt to force a 'no deal' through parliament - hinting that he and other Tories could be prepared to vote down the government in a confidence motion to prevent that outcome.

Indeed, Labour has said it would "immediately" slap down a vote of no confidence in the new prime minister and government - given that the country, in the words of John McDonnell, is "possibly faced with an extremist leader of the Conservative Party willing to take us over the edge of a no deal". This should cause some alarm for Brexiteers, as, following the defection of three Tory MPs to what is now Change UK, the working majority of the Conservative-DUP alliance is now just six - meaning only four Tories would need to switch sides

for a no-confidence vote to succeed. If the new leader fails at the first hurdle - maybe going down in history as the shortest premiership in history - and no alternative government is cobbled together by the Commons within 14 days, there will be a general election.

### Arithmetic

If Boris Johnson is crowned leader, in whatever way - and survives a no-confidence vote from Labour - he still faces the same remorseless parliamentary arithmetic. Is he going to come back from Brussels with a magical piece of paper that is so radically different from what Theresa May brought back?

This seems highly unlikely, as Brussels, barring some extraordinary development, will never agree to renegotiate the Irish backstop. Indeed, what the mainstream European leaders fear most of all is the growth of the populist right - they want to use the mess of Brexit as an object lesson to others who may choose to follow this path: it is not worth it. The lesson might be sinking in, as the majority of hard-right parties in Europe are not 'exiters' now, but 'remainers' of a special type - fighting from within for ever *looser* union and some sort of free-trade zone.

Under these circumstances, where Boris Johnson is unable to negotiate some sumptuous new deal, then he would do the obvious - call a general election. Nigel Farage might say that Johnson is an untrustworthy careerist, which is obviously true - the man only made up his mind about joining the Brexit camp in the days before the start of the referendum campaign. But in a general election he could well Hoover up Brexit Party votes and those longing for change of almost any sort. On the day, maybe Johnson will campaign better than Theresa May - it not being possible to do any worse - and perhaps Jeremy Corbyn's magic will have worn off.

Another factor worth considering is the impending visit of Donald Trump to the UK between June 3 and 5. The US president may well endorse Johnson - his favourite British politician after Farage - even if he is advised not to. All this with

the drums of war beating loudly in the Middle East. Unlike Corbyn, the 'anti-Semite', Johnson would enthusiastically back any US military campaign against Iran in the name of defending Israel.

A hard or no-deal Brexit under prime minister Johnson would be music to Trump's ears. The US hard right wants to see the break-up of the EU and free-trade agreements with individual countries. An Atlanticist Britain would not only doggedly follow every US move internationally: it could be relied on to open up its markets, including the NHS, to US transnationals. American farmers are greedily eyeing British consumers and would certainly demand an erosion of already poor food standards. Then there is fracking, climate change, labour laws, etc.

But the alternative of sticking to the EU status quo is illusory. The EU is malfunctioning and showing all the signs of paralysis. Not only is there the rise of the hard right. And, of course, the EU has a neoliberal constitution, a toothless parliament and an ineffective core leadership. There is no consensus between Germany and France over the way forward.

For us the answer lies not in restoring Britain's sovereignty (impossible - the days of the British empire are over for ever). Nor does it lie in a second referendum and banking on incremental reform in Brussels. No, the working class, in Europe, and beyond, needs its own politics, its own vision and its own organisations: first and foremost, in the immediate term, a Communist Party of the EU. Only with such an organisation could we overthrow the existing constitutional order and open up the road to working class rule and global communism ●

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### Notes

1. [www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2019/may/28/tory-leadership-contest-odds-tracker-whos-up-and-whos-down](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/ng-interactive/2019/may/28/tory-leadership-contest-odds-tracker-whos-up-and-whos-down).
2. [www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2019/05/leadership-election-candidate-support-numbers-hunt-27-johnson-19-raab-13-gove-12-javid-10.html](http://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2019/05/leadership-election-candidate-support-numbers-hunt-27-johnson-19-raab-13-gove-12-javid-10.html).

## ECONOMY

# Trade and technology trigger

Michael Roberts warns that the US-China trade war brings with it the threat of another global downturn

Despite all the optimistic talk by Donald Trump about the state of the US economy, the latest data on economic activity and industrial production suggest that America is joining Europe and Japan in a sharp slowdown, as we enter the second half of 2019. And this is at a time when the trade and technology war between the US and China has moved up another gear and so threatens to trigger an outright global recession before the year is out.

JP Morgan economists report that the so-called flash May PMIs (purchasing managers indexes) for the US, Europe and Japan point to a 0.7-point decline, consistent with just 2.5% annual growth in global domestic product. PMIs are surveys of company views on their current and future sales and purchases - they have proved to be reasonable guides to actual production. And 2.5% growth globally is considered to be the 'stall speed' for the world economy, below which a recession is indicated.

JP Morgan finds that global manufacturing is suffering most - being nearly at 50 in the PMI (anything below 50 means contraction). But services, which constitute 70%-80% of most major economies (at least in the official definition), are also sliding towards the levels of the mini-recession of 2015-16. And, most concerning, according to JPM, "the global manufacturing and services expectations measures look set to fall roughly two points in May and would push the indexes beneath the lows set in early 2016".

Like other forecasts, the economic outlook published last week by the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development predicts slower growth this year than last in most big economies - in some cases *much* slower.<sup>1</sup> What is more, even in 2020 global growth will not return to the pace it reached in the past few years, it says. Angel Gurría, its secretary-general, stated: "The world economy is in a dangerous place."

### Slowdown

Up to now, it has been in Europe and Japan that signs of a slowdown and even an outright recession were visible. But now the US economy may be joining them. The US manufacturing PMI dropped to 50.6 in May, implying almost stagnation. It was the lowest reading since September 2009, as new orders fell for the first time since August 2009, while output and employment rose less than previously.

The services sector also dropped back and the overall economic indicator showed the weakest expansion in the private sector since May 2016. Then, on May 24, we had actual data for US manufactured durable goods - new orders had fallen by 2.1% compared to a month earlier. Transportation equipment - also down two of the last three months - was a major factor in the decrease. The Atlanta Fed's 'GDPNow' model estimate (a very reliable indicator of future growth) puts US real GDP growth in the second quarter of 2019 at just 1.3%.

When we get to Europe, the latest figure for the continent's powerhouse, German manufacturing activity, makes particularly dismal reading. May saw a fifth month of contraction in the manufacturing sector, as new orders continued to fall sharply, largely due to lower demand across the car industry and the effects of customer destocking. In addition, the rate of job losses accelerated to the quickest since January 2013.

Even with the services sector



Growth is declining

holding up, overall activity in Germany looks very weak. And the business morale survey is at its lowest for nearly five years. Activity in the euro zone as a whole is also at a near five-year low.

Japan's economy is "worsening" for the first time in more than six years, according to one of the government's main indicators. The index of economic conditions compiled by Japan's cabinet office fell 0.9% from February to March. That prompted government statisticians to cut their assessment of the economy from "weakening" to "worsening" - the lowest of five levels. The last time the cabinet office used the bottom grade to describe the economy was in January 2013. Barclays economist Kazuma Maeda said that the "mechanical" downgrade in the assessment did not necessarily imply that a downturn was in prospect. But he added: "That said, there is mounting concern about an economic recession."

Nominal activity growth in Japan, which can be viewed as an up-to-date proxy for nominal GDP, has been falling since the end of 2017, since the decline in real output growth has been greater than the rise in inflation. On the core nominal activity measure, the rate of increase has now dipped to around 0.5%, lower than it was at bottom of the 2016 deflationary shock.

As an aside, it is worth noting that Japan is supposed to be the poster child of Keynesian fiscal and monetary policy. The Bank of Japan has negative interest rates and has bought virtually all government bonds available from the banks, as well as corporate debt and stock, through massive credit injections in the last 10 years. And it has consistently run budget deficits to try and boost the economy; so much so that the government debt-to-GDP is the highest in the world. But nominal GDP growth and prices continue to stagnate.

Those who support 'modern monetary theory' should take note.<sup>2</sup> Yes, you can have budget deficits permanently and run up public debt without consequences for inflation or even the currency in an economy like Japan. But you cannot get a permanent boost to growth if Japan's corporations will not invest and neither will the government. Creating money does not necessarily create value. The irony is that prime minister Shinzo Abe plans to raise the sales tax later this year to try and lower the deficits and debt ratios in line with neoliberal policy. The last time he did that, Japan went into recession.

Outside the imperialist blocs, the so-called 'emerging market' economies are also slowing. Turkey, Argentina and Pakistan are already in recession, while Brazil and South Africa are on

the brink. And capital flows to these economies from the imperialist bloc are drying up, while public-sector investment has nearly ground to a halt.

Net public investment in emerging-market countries has fallen below 1% of GDP for the first time on record, raising fears of widening infrastructure gaps. The share of national output that developing-world governments are spending on investment in assets such as schools, hospitals and transport and power infrastructure, net of depreciation of the existing capital stock, has fallen from 3.3% in 1997 to a low of just 0.9% last year, according to data from the International Monetary Fund. This is well below what the IMF believed as needed to meet basic needs and allow countries to close infrastructure gaps that are slowing the pace of development.

Indeed, if you exclude China, then investment growth is dropping in the rest of the G20 economies. Only the US and India are keeping investment positive. If they should falter, since investment is the driver, a global recession would follow.

If China is stripped out of the data, the weighted average for the rest of the emerging world is 3.9% of GDP, markedly lower than the 4.8% figure seen as recently as 2010. The 49 low-income developing countries - mainly in Africa, but also encompassing the likes of Vietnam, Bangladesh and Moldova - are even more badly placed, with the IMF calculating they need to invest an additional 7.1% of GDP a year until 2030 on roads, electricity and water alone. With health and education added in, this rises to a colossal 15.4% of GDP - or \$528 billion - a year.

### Profitability

Low profitability explains above all else why corporate investment has been so weak since 2009.<sup>3</sup> What profits have been made have been switched into financial speculation: mergers and acquisitions, share buybacks and dividend payouts. Also, there has been some hoarding of cash by 'the FAANGs' (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google). All this is because the profitability of productive investment remains historically low.

The other key factor in the long depression has been the rise in debt, particularly corporate debt. With profitability low, companies have run up more debt in order to fund projects or speculate. The big companies like Apple or Microsoft can do this because they have cash hoards to fall back on if anything goes wrong; the smaller companies can only manage this debt spiral because interest rates remain at all-time lows and so servicing the debt

is still feasible - as long as there is not a downturn in sales and profits.

When fundamentals like profitability and debt turn sour for capital, then anything can trigger a slump. Each crisis has a different trigger or proximate cause. The 1974-75 international recession was triggered by a sharp rise in oil prices and the US abandoning the dollar-gold standard in 1971. The 1980-82 slump was triggered by a housing bubble in Europe and a manufacturing crisis in the major economies. The 1990-92 recession was triggered by the Iraq war and oil prices. The 2001 mild recession was the result of the bursting of the dot.com bubble. And the great recession was started with the collapse of the housing bubble in the US and the ensuing credit crunch, brought on by the international diversification of credit derivatives. But underlying each of these crises was a downward movement in the profitability of productive capital and eventually a slowdown or decline in the mass of profits.<sup>4</sup>

It now seems possible that brewing trade war between the US and China could be a new trigger for a global recession. Certainly, US investment bank Morgan Stanley has raised such a risk. Its analysts stated:

While a temporary escalation of trade tensions could be navigated without much damage at all, a lasting breakdown would inflict serious pain. If talks stall, no deal is agreed upon and the US imposes 25% tariffs on the remaining circa \$300 billion of imports from China, we see the global economy heading towards recession.<sup>5</sup>

The danger coming from the trade war has also been highlighted. According to the OECD, international trade has slowed abruptly. Its rate of increase has fallen from 5.5% in 2017 to what the OECD thinks will be 2.1% and 3.1% this year and next. That is lower than projected economic growth, meaning trade is shrinking as a share of global economic activity. Since 2009, it had been the slowdown in investment that has led to a dip in trade growth; and the IMF estimated that three-quarters of the trade-growth slowdown could be attributed to weak economic activity, especially in investment. But now the boot seems to be on the other foot.

The OECD numbers on aggregate investment are corroborated by more fine-grained data. Most big US companies' investment spending, as reported in regulatory filings, has stalled dramatically. A *Wall Street Journal* investigation of 356 of the S&P 500 companies found that they spent only three percent more on capital in the first quarter year on year (down from a 20% growth rate a year earlier). For the biggest capital spenders, investment fell outright. Trade frictions seem the main cause - directly for businesses particularly reliant on Chinese demand, such as specialised chip producers, as well as indirectly through the increased uncertainty spreading through the economy. Another survey has found that many US companies operating in China are also holding back from investing.

Morgan Stanley also warned not to underestimate the impact of trade tensions in a number of ways. Firstly, the impact on the US corporate sector would be more widespread, as China could put up non-tariff barriers, such as restriction of purchases. Given the global growth slowdown that would

follow, profits from firms' international operations would be hit and companies would not be able to fully pass on the tariff increases to consumers.

### Chain reaction

What makes it likely that the trade war will not be resolved amicably to avoid a global recession is that the battle between the US and China is not just over 'unfair trade': it is much more an attempt by the US to maintain its global technological superiority in the face of China's fast rise to compete. The attack on Huawei, globally organised by the US, is just a start.

A chain reaction is under way, as a giant industry braces for a violent shock. US investment bank Goldman Sachs has noted that, since 2010, the only place where corporate earnings have expanded is in the US. And this, according to Goldmans, is entirely down to the super-tech companies. Global profits ex technology are only moderately higher than they were prior to the financial crisis, while technology profits have moved sharply upwards (mainly reflecting the impact of large US technology companies).

The growth slowdown is the result of low investment and profitability in most economies and in most sectors. Only the huge tech companies in the US have bucked this trend, helped by a recent profits bonanza from the Trump tax 'reforms'.<sup>6</sup> But now the technology war with China will hit tech profits too - even if the US and China reach a trade deal.

The IMF is very concerned. Its new chief economist, Gita Gopinath, commented:

While the impact on global growth is relatively modest at this time, the latest escalation could significantly dent business and financial market sentiment, disrupt global supply chains and jeopardise the projected recovery in global growth in 2019.

Roberto Azevêdo, director general of the World Trade Organisation, said the US-China trade war was hurting the global economy. The WTO has been bypassed by the US, as the Trump administration aims its attacks directly on China. According to Azevêdo,

\$580 billion [£458 billion] of restrictive measures were introduced in the last year - seven times more than the previous year. This is holding back investors, this is holding back consumers and, of course, it is having an impact on the expansion of the global economy. Everyone loses ... every single country will lose unless we find a solution for this.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed ●

Michael Roberts blogs at <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com>.

### Notes

1. www.oecd.org/economy/economic-outlook.
2. See <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2019/02/05/mmt-3-a-backstop-to-capitalism>.
3. <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2019/04/14/a-delicate-moment>.
4. See 'The profit investment nexus': <https://thenextrecession.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/the-profit-investment-nexus.pdf>.
5. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-trade-china-recession/full-blown-trade-war-will-push-world-towards-recession-morgan-stanley-idUKKCN1S1Q6>.
6. <https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2018/08/30/trumps-profits-bonanza>.
7. [www.theguardian.com/business/live/2019/may/23/trade-war-china-us-fight-panasonic-huawei-business-live?page=with:block-5cc6a6938f08cb6183374a6d](http://www.theguardian.com/business/live/2019/may/23/trade-war-china-us-fight-panasonic-huawei-business-live?page=with:block-5cc6a6938f08cb6183374a6d).

## IDENTITY

# Philosophy, Marxism and gender ideology

Rex Dunn makes a contribution to our ongoing debate. He argues that genderism stems from working class defeats and poststructuralist subjectivism

In the age of LGBT+, how should Marxists approach the question of gender? From the standpoint of science, in her article, 'Decoupled from reality', Amanda MacLean argues that "biological factors" are the "determining motivation" (*Weekly Worker* April 18). But, according to Finlay Scott Gilmour, she is guilty of "biological determinism", because the "intricacy of human psychology" must "come above that of our biology" ('Against biological determinism', *Weekly Worker* May 2).

Is this compatible with dialectical materialism or is it subjective idealism? Apart from science, another way to look at this question is within the wider context of philosophy, as well as Marxist theory - which is what I shall try to do in this article.

Gilmour goes even further: "... we must take a step back from the 'natural' and step towards the 'unnatural': that is, the existence of societal constructs in relation to our psyche." This means that nature can be superseded by unnatural means - be they medical procedures, which make the transgender phenomenon possible, or even the production of androids, and so on. But is this not the product of technological utopianism, which leads to the assumption that man is *homo deus*? This erroneous idea becomes even more clear when we consider the theory that a post-capitalist society can be achieved without a revolution, because it will be based on the internet and artificial intelligence; thus the dream of creating a 'post-gender' or 'new type of human being' can be fulfilled. (see section on poststructuralism below).

### MacLean vs Gilmour

But to return to MacLean. If I understand her correctly, her position may be summarised as follows:

As a scientist and a materialist, she starts out with the observation that sex/gender has a biological basis. This applies to many species, not just humans. After all, humans are part of the animal kingdom, part of nature. But because we are human, we also have a highly evolved brain/mind that is the source of human sexuality: ie, it is social/historical. Enter the role of the psyche - a creative approach to sexual pleasure (in addition to the need to procreate). Today this ranges from the heterosexual majority to gays, bisexuals, transgenders and non-binaries. Yet, apart from the last of these, because we are either male or female, sexual pleasure is based on a binary template, which then becomes the basis for a whole variety of sexual behaviours.

Apropos the rise of the LGBT+ movement, this has to be seen as a response to the fact that relations between the sexes continues to be dominated by patriarchy, which is oppressive. It emerged as a form of exploitation and power exercised by men over women, which then became an integral part of class society. This continues to be the case, even within the present, 'enlightened' period of late capitalism: ie, the 'free market'. The latter, of course, can only offer the illusion of individual freedom. Nevertheless the rise of the LGBT+ movement has to be seen as an attempt to escape from sexual oppression - cursed by its binary template - albeit *within* capitalism. But this is impossible. If there is any doubt about this, consider the ongoing attacks on trans and non-binary people, etc. Thus in order to defend sexual freedom in all its forms, it is necessary to overthrow capitalism itself.



Drag kings

For Gilmour, however, thanks to medical technology, sexual freedom can be achieved within capitalism. Therefore he sees MacLean's biological approach to sex/gender as a "hangover of empirio-criticism". He starts out by referring to Lenin's book, *Materialism and empirio-criticism: critical comments on a reactionary philosophy* (1908), wherein Lenin attacks the ideas of Ernst Mach and Alexander Bogdanov. Although Gilmour does not follow this through, he suggests that MacLean adheres to the same one-sided metaphysical materialism (empirio-criticism), which states that "the world consists only of my sensations", instead of adding that material existence consists of our "psyche that forms as a reaction to it". But, by arguing the latter, Gilmour bends the stick too far the other way, so it is he who ends up being a one-sided metaphysical materialist - not MacLean.

Gilmour says:

First of all, we must understand the argument of the empirio-critics on metaphysics, and, most importantly the conception of the 'self', and how we see the relation of matter to sensation *viz* physical reaction. To begin, Lenin attacks the notion of the empirio-critics that our existence is composed primarily of our sensations; that, being an individual, I feel, therefore I am. What Lenin points out here is that we cannot understand biological matter separately from the psyche that forms as a reaction to it. What we can discern from this is an understanding of materialism and the analysis of the self: material existence is primary; undeniably, our psychical reactions develop as part of the existence of matter.

So far, so good. Then Gilmour suddenly jumps to:

This, of course, within the field of natural science is a perfectly

reasonable explanation, but we might take a step back from the 'natural' and step towards the 'unnatural: that is, the existence of societal constructs in relation to our psyche.

Just like that, he abandons dialectical materialism! What is the purpose of wanting to be unnatural? (It is not the same thing as artificial.) Today it is possible to become unnatural, but is it logical? Perhaps reason has become unreason? Is this a good thing?

If I understand Gilmour correctly, he means that when someone makes the transition from one gender to another (in particular, 'full' transition with the help of medical intervention), although this is unnatural, it is OK, because the person is still a human being. Not only is this true: he/she also has the *right* to do this as well. But gender is an entity, whose essence can only be explained in terms of those characteristics which make it the kind of thing it is. It cannot be explained merely on the basis of outward appearances. Even though it might look the part, the newly acquired gender entity cannot perform the same functions as the natural one which the person has chosen to emulate. By contrast, if a person loses a limb, this can be replaced by an artificial one, which not only looks similar: it can also perform the same functions (perhaps not as well) as the original.

Despite appealing to Lenin's *Materialism and empirio-criticism* (MEC) in support of his position, Gilmour's ends up in the camp of metaphysical materialism: ie, the flip side of Mach and co. He errs on the side of subjective idealism, not dialectical materialism. Whereas the empirio-critics argue that sensations are the only source of knowledge, he asserts a theory of 'the self positing itself', which reflects the influence of poststructuralism.

Apropos Lenin's MEC, this needs to be considered in relation to his *Philosophical notebooks* (PN - written between 1914 and 1916), since

Marxism has long been susceptible to creeping revisionism. In the first instance, this was a reaction to the negative effects of the Stalinist counterrevolution. As the betrayals and defeats piled up, revisionist ideas began to become more pervasive, as the 20th century wore on. The left needed to find another path to revolution or explain why it would not happen at all!

### Vulgar

For example, it was claimed that the MEC was the product of 'vulgar', 'eastern' Marxism, as opposed to 'western' Marxism. What follows is based on a recent article by Alberto Toscano - 'With Lenin, against Hegel? "Materialism and empirio-criticism" and the mutations of western Marxism'.<sup>1</sup> In it Toscano refers to three works: Theodor Adorno's *Negative dialectics*; Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Adventures of the dialectic*; and Henri Lefebvre's *Pour connaître la pensée de Lénine*. Merleau-Ponty was an exponent of 20th century phenomenology, which focuses on a superficial description of the appearance of things. Adorno played a leading role in the rise of critical theory or cultural Marxism, whereas Lefebvre tried to defend classical Marxism: ie, he was a lifelong critic of Stalinism and structuralism.

Toscano states that, according to Adorno and Merleau-Ponty, Lenin wanted to "reaffirm that dialectical materialism is a materialism ... taking up again the old allegory of ideas-images ... He forgot that an effect does not resemble its cause and that knowledge, being an effect of things, is located ... outside its object."

For Hegel, on the other hand, "the problem of knowledge is surmounted, because there no longer can be a question of timeless relations between being and thought, but only of relations between man and history..." But Lenin puts the knowing subject outside the fabric of

history. (This is, of course, a travesty of his position, because no attempt is made to distinguish between Lenin and 'Soviet Marxism': ie, Stalinist dialectical materialism or 'diamat'.)

Then again, Colletti (another western Marxist/anti-Leninist), attacks the PN, because they represent a "backsliding" from the MEC: ie, the "abandonment of scientific materialism".

But for Lefebvre, if Lenin's earlier work ignores the contribution of Hegel to Marx's ideas, the PN restore this important legacy. Toscano states that Lefebvre:

identifies the key nexus of Lenin's intervention in a gap left in the work of Marx and Engels, ie, the "hiatus" between their theory of ideological reflection (in *The German ideology*, *Capital's* account of fetishism) ... and Marx's the theory of knowledge, the theory of the reflection of the real ... immediate sensation and spontaneous consciousness are just the beginning, which would lead to true reflection, through a series of mediations to immediate phenomena and appearances ... There is a dialectical unity of the absolute and the relative ... human cognition is a complex, doubled, zigzagging act ... that includes the "possibility of an imaginative flight beyond life, where we might even ... be able to distinguish a fertile dream from an empty revelry". [cf the classical Greek thinkers.]

Thus, argues Lefebvre, we arrive at "Lenin's central idea": the "objectivity of the dialectic". The PN "cut through the Gordian knot of science and ideology around the issue of materialism". For Lefebvre, they overcome the limits of the MEC by embracing a properly dialectical concept of reality.

Toscano points out that Marxists do not reject empirical enquiry: in his PN Lenin writes: "Nature is reflected in the human brain. By checking and applying correctness to these reflections, man arrives at objective truth."<sup>2</sup> Kant, on the other hand,

holds fast to [the] Ego in self-consciousness, from which everything empirical must be omitted, since the aim is to know the essence, or Thing-in-itself. Now nothing remains but the phenomenon ... 'I think', which accompanies every idea; and nobody has the slightest notion of this 'I think'. This means that Hume and Kant 'doubt the objectivity of cognition.'<sup>3</sup>

"Idealism cannot be logically refuted, it can only be fought against", writes Toscano. He quotes Lefebvre again, who states that, likewise, "one cannot demonstrate, one cannot prove materialism". Therefore dialectical and historical materialism can only be proved indirectly - ie, on the basis of the objectivity of concepts, as well as empirical evidence. As Lenin himself says in his PN, "Logic coincides with the theory of knowledge [dialectical materialism] ... Not psychology, not phenomenology of mind, but logic."<sup>4</sup> So "Part of this logic, which produces a theory of knowledge", is based on the observation of "the objective process: nature (mechanical and chemical)", as well as "the purposiveness of man."<sup>5</sup>

But the truth can only be proved through practice. How should this be undertaken? The bourgeois

political economist “takes up the data of experience one-sidedly”. Therefore, “Concrete experience [is] thus subordinated to the presupposed determinations [which serves the interests of the bourgeoisie]”.<sup>6</sup> Whereas, for the Marxist, there must be “a coincidence of subjective and objective; [this is] the test of objective ideas, the criterion of objective truth”.<sup>7</sup>

## Essentialism

We now come to the argument that Lenin’s logical concept of reality, based on dialectical materialism - as opposed to subjective idealism - is also compatible with essentialism (a tendency within philosophy): in particular, the category of ‘essence’, which is its starting point.

In his book *Essentialism in the thought of Karl Marx*, Scott Meikle argues that Marx was an essentialist from start to finish: not just in his early ‘abstract’ manuscripts, but also in *Capital* Vol 3, wherein the basis of human history is explained as the “specific form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers, [revealing] the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure”.<sup>8</sup>

Essentialism dates back to Greek antiquity. In this regard, Marx is closer to Aristotle than he is to materialists like Democritus and Epicurus; because they

thought of reality as atomistic small bits that combine and repel in a void. Therefore [they found it difficult to account] for the persisting natures of things, species and genera on that basis. [However, Aristotle] realised that no account of such things could be possible without admitting a category of form (or essence), because what a thing is, and what things of its kind are, cannot possibly be explained in terms of their constituent matter (atoms), since that changes, while the entity retains its nature and identity over time.<sup>9</sup>

Lenin appears to agree with Marx as well. In the *PN* there is a section on ‘Hegel’s lectures on the history of philosophy’, which criticises him for overlooking Aristotle’s critique of Plato.<sup>10</sup> Meikle adds:

Atomism and essentialism have been at war throughout the history of philosophy: Essentialism was dominant during the Middle Ages; but during the enlightenment, atomism was espoused by Descartes, Hobbes and Hume. Essentialism only reappears again with Hegel and 19th century idealism. This includes Marx, who then transforms it into dialectical and historical materialism.

The difference is between those who see reality in terms of organic wholes, which have real natures and necessities for their development (the essentialists or organicists), as opposed to those who think there are no knowable essences (the atomists or anti-essentialists). But things were further complicated in the 20th century, because “the *diamat* of ‘official’ Marxism had as its basic distinction that between idealism and materialism; [unfortunately] a reductive materialist account was then given to materialism ...”<sup>11</sup>: ie, determinism, which has proved to be so detrimental to Marxism.

From an essentialist standpoint, a man or woman has to be seen as an entity, which can only be explained scientifically and realistically in terms of ‘what it is, and what things of its kind are’. Gender cannot be explained in terms of its constituent matter (atomism). But this is the only way in which we can explain full gender transition from one sex to another, or to genderlessness. Therefore

manufactured appearances become more important than the original organic whole (chromosomes, skeletal structure, gonads, voice, as well as superficial physical characteristics, such as facial hair). The only way this can be rationalised is by means of subjective idealism. As a result, the criterion of gender is now determined solely by self-identification - be that a transition to the opposite gender or genderlessness, albeit in defiance of objective reality. (Here I am talking about a lifestyle choice, for whatever reason, not a tiny minority of people who are physically intersex.)

## Poststructuralism

As I have already stated, the western left tried to revise Marxism, whereas the poststructuralists abandoned Marxism altogether. The latter were driven by a return to subjective idealism, which continues to dominate philosophy to this day, even though poststructuralism itself has disintegrated, since it never was a cohesive movement.

It had been bubbling away beneath the surface of philosophical ideas, but, following the defeat of 1968, its re-emergence was an understandable reaction to the objectivist tendencies within Stalinist ‘*diamat*’ and Althusserian Marxism. The former espoused a reductivist view of history: capitalism as a mode of production that came into being by negating feudalism; only to be negated, in turn, by socialism and communism, given its internal contradictions. But the *événements* of 1968 were dismissed as adventurism, because anarchist students and Trotskyite workers substituted themselves for the revolution before it was ready!

Althusser was guilty of the same methodology. But, in his case, he breaks with Marx’s base/superstructure model, arguing that ideological and theoretical practices are as much material forces as economic and political practices. Thus the proletariat will never be able to overcome the existing ideological forms and develop communist consciousness. Both positions were a rationalisation for the Stalinist bureaucracy, which put its own privileged interests above everything else.

In his book, *Logics of disintegration*, Peter Dews suggests that ideas based on subjective idealism are the only common denominator of poststructuralism, given that the trajectory of the movement itself is a reflection of the “logics of disintegration” within late capitalist society! That said, we can speak of the ‘big four’ (Lacan, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard).

It makes sense to begin with Lyotard, because he started out as a semi-Trotskyist and played an active part in the *événements*. But, after this experience, he came to the conclusion that the proletariat is not the ‘grave-digger of capitalism’ after all. Therefore in *Discourse figure* (1970) he turns away from the economic-political sphere to the libidinal sphere, whereby “the attitude of the here-and-now” is able to provoke “a mutation of desire in relation to the system”. He rejects “any determinate goal of struggle”, along with the Hegelian-Marxist notion of mediation; rather desire is a “positive energy, which disrupts the discourse in order to embody the [images] of fantasy”. Dews adds that “his drift, starting from Marx and Freud, becomes a headlong race towards the characteristic 1970s terminus of Nietzsche”.<sup>12</sup>

Lacan may be considered as the ‘father’ of poststructuralism, since he was working on some of its ideas in the 1950s. Having studied Freud along with linguistics, he began to argue that the human potential to become a ‘knowing subject’ must be rejected (cf Marxism). So there can never be a “coherent theory of consciousness and subjectivity”, because the ego and the subject of the

unconscious cannot be distinguished, since the latter is constantly striving for “adequate representation”.<sup>13</sup>

As for Derrida, his interest in German idealism plays a key role - in particular, Fichte’s *Science of knowledge*. This posits the idea that the unity of ‘apperception’ (perception which reflects upon itself) is paramount, which leads to the unfolding of activity of an absolute self: “the object is the reflection of the subject, rather than something other than the subject”; it is an attempt to “develop a theory of the self positing itself”.<sup>14</sup> Enter Derrida’s account of language - writing, which undermines the aim of “grasping the unitary meaning of the text”. According to his concept of *différance*, all the metaphysical oppositions (signifier/signified, sense/intellect, writing/speech, space/time, passivity/activity, etc) are negated: “the standpoint of finite consciousness can be transcended by a ‘track of the text’. But this track can only be the mark of speculation. Therefore Derrida offers us a philosophy of *différance* as an absolute.” Hence we have the “regress of reflection”, which “renders the phenomenon of consciousness as inexplicable, so ... there could never be an emergence of meaning”.<sup>15</sup> Further, “Once subjectivity has been made dependent on language, then consciousness can no longer function as the self-identical support of the unity of signifier and signified: meaning itself becomes a transient ‘effect’ of the signifier ...”<sup>16</sup> Thus we end up with relativism - “the perpetual deferral of meaning” - as well as the abolition of the subject-object distinction.

Dews concludes: “It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that during the 1970s, in the wake of the upheavals of the late 1960s, new conceptions of the unconscious began to emerge in France, which lay stress on the heterogeneity of desire and language, and which will emphasise the capacity of desire to dislocate and disrupt the symbolic and social order.”<sup>17</sup>

Apropos the above, it is reasonable to assume that, given his argument, which sees a seamless transition from the natural to unnatural, Gilmour’s ideas are a reflection of what happened to philosophy and theory during the final quarter of the 20th century: ie, poststructuralist theory had succeeded in its challenge to overthrow the influence of Stalinist *diamat* and Althusserian Marxism (which based itself on structuralist theory). But no attempt was made to distinguish between this and classical Marxism. The critical theory of the Frankfurt School was also thrown in for good measure. As Dews says, all had to be finessed as part of the “repressive functioning of classical conceptions of truth and reason”.<sup>18</sup> Therefore subjective idealism replaced Marxism in its objectivist form (leaving classical Marxism struggling to survive).

Finally, poststructuralist thought also provided a foundation for new ideas about gender, linked to the idea that the natural and the unnatural are perfectly compatible. This is the antithesis of Lenin’s position, wherein he makes a clear distinction between subject and object, humanity and nature: for him, objective truth exists outside of human sense perception. Ideas can lead to the truth, based on rational thought. But ideas, of course, have to be proved in practice, as a result of empirical research and experiment.

Lenin was unable to put his own ideas and strategies for the revolution to a proper test, because, thanks to the betrayal of social democracy, especially in Germany, the revolution started at the right time, but in the wrong place: ie, Russia. As a result, it was immediately attacked by an imperialist-led counterrevolution from without; it was unable to move forward, because the German

revolution had been smashed in its infancy. Thus the seeds of the Stalinist counterrevolution from within were sown. The rest is history!

## The future?

Given his demand that “we must take a step back from the natural” and step towards the “unnatural”, Gilmour’s ideas are also consistent with those of the post-capitalists. Both share the belief that technology is the key to the future, as this extract from an article by Owen Hatherley shows:

In 2013, two American academics, Nick Smicek and Alex Williams, issued a “manifesto for accelerated politics”, affirming “mastery, technology and liberator possibilities of capitalism if pushed beyond its limits”. This includes “post-gender dreams of radical feminism” and even more: the possibility of a “new kind of human being ... an interventionist approach to the human”, an embrace of “individual bodily experimentation”, set against “restricted images of the human, ... a new human with a new body”, in conjunction with the creation of a new society, whose agency is the “internet generation”.<sup>19</sup>

Not only does this belong to the realm of science fiction: it also implies that man - in the generic sense, of course - has become *homo deus*. (cf Marx’s view in *Capital* Vol 3 that the telos of man is to become *homo aestheticus*; but only communist society can establish the material basis for the abolition of the contradictions between “work and pleasure”, along with “the play of bodily and mental powers”).<sup>20</sup>

But the question of the need to break with private property relations - currently concentrated in the hands of powerful corporate entities - is ignored. As Walter Benjamin observed in 1936, “Fascism attempts to organise the ... proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate.”<sup>21</sup>

Consider *reality*: apart from a growing environmental crisis (climate change, widespread pollution of the planet, mass extinction), when we consider the effects of rising inequality on tens of millions of human beings, the claims of the post-capitalists, along with those of Gilmour, appear to be even more fanciful.

This is a hindrance, because today capitalism is winning the ideological war. This is the only reason why it is still in existence. To this end, right across the western world, identitarian politics is at the forefront of neo liberalism’s social agenda. Although the LGBT+ movement developed independently of the bourgeois state - ie, within academia - this was soon appropriated by the latter, as a means to instil the *illusion* that, under capitalism, there is more individual freedom, based on the values of pluralism and inclusiveness.

But this contains a fundamental contradiction: on the one hand, all religions and cultures are considered equal; on the other, the ideologues of neoliberalism now promote LGBT+ ideas. Recently they became part of religious and sex education in English primary schools. Inevitably, this has led to a backlash from groups who identify themselves on the grounds of religion - in particular, the Muslim community. Cue another backlash, this time within the white working class, identifying themselves with Christian culture - which needs to be defended from the Muslim ‘invaders’. At the same time, they forget that their lives are being made more miserable by neoliberal capitalism, in the form of permanent austerity, etc. Once the state abandons secularism, the separation of church and state (etc), we get social disintegration and conflict. This is happening now.

At the same time, we have unprecedented levels of inequality,

which continues to increase. As the Marxist economist, Michael Roberts, says, “eight billionaires have as much wealth as 3.6 billion people - the poorest half of the world”. Now the middle class is being squeezed.<sup>22</sup> The latest UN report on austerity in Britain says that people on low incomes are likely to live lives that are “solitary, nasty, brutish and short”.<sup>23</sup>

But, instead of a return to Marxism, we see the rise of rightwing populism everywhere, even within traditional working class areas. As a result, we have nostalgia for past glories, which leads to chauvinism and the demand to ‘make our country great again’, etc. Meanwhile harassment of LGBT+ people is growing. At the same time, Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson - aka the intellectual spokesman for rightwing populism - identifies radical feminism and gender ideology with Marxism, despite the fact that it has its origins within poststructuralist theory.

The media tell us that more and more young people are choosing the LGBT+ alternative. Logically if this were to become the norm for the whole of society, the present situation would be reversed: procreation and everything that goes with it - desire, sex, love, family and having children - would be relegated to just a small minority of the population. If that happened, assuming the world is not destroyed by nuclear war, it would be necessary to move towards a *Brave new world* kind of society: ie, we would have to resort to cloning in order to reproduce the human species. We would also need androids to replace human labour. As for artificial intelligence, it is already on the brink of replacing human creativity: eg, books can be written by advanced computers. Meanwhile capitalism is bringing the planet closer to an ecological catastrophe. This does not augur well for humanity, let alone many other species, upon which we depend for our existence.

Where is humanity going? On the one hand, as Marx once said, under private property relations, we have a one-sided development of the productive forces, which have become increasingly destructive for the majority. On the other, we have the legacy of poststructuralism: eg, the fantastical claims of the post-capitalists - wherein gender ideology plays a central role (cf Gilmour’s call for a “step towards the ‘unnatural’”). But, as Lenin says in his *PN*, this is subjective idealism - “facets of knowledge ... divorced from matter, from nature, apotheosised ... a road to clerical obscurantism”.<sup>24</sup> It takes us even further away from the social revolution, which is the prerequisite for building a future communist society ●

## Notes

1. www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/with-lenin-against-hegel-materialism-and-empirio-criticism-and-mutations-western-marxism.
2. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 38, ‘Philosophical notebooks’, Moscow 1972, p201.
3. *Ibid* p205.
4. *Ibid* p179.
5. *Ibid* p187.
6. *Ibid* p210.
7. *Ibid* p217.
8. S Meikle *Essentialism in the thought of Karl Marx* London 1985, p8.
9. *Ibid* p9.
10. VI Lenin *op cit* p287.
11. S Meikle *op cit* p4.
12. P Dews *Logics of disintegration* London 1990, pp129-31.
13. *Ibid* p88.
14. *Ibid* pp20-21.
15. *Ibid* pp23-24, 30, 40.
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17. *Ibid* p108.
18. *Ibid* introduction, pxxvii.
19. O Hatherley, ‘One click at a time’ *London Review of Books* June 30 2016.
20. K Marx *Capital* Vol 3, Moscow 1986, p820.
21. W Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* New York 1969, epilogue, p241.
22. M Roberts, ‘Inequality soars worldwide’ *Weekly Worker* May 16 2019.
23. BBC News, May 22 2019.
24. VI Lenin *op cit* p363.

**MIDDLE EAST**

# Only the Iranian people

Recent events have demonstrated yet again why 'regime change from above' will only produce chaos, destruction and death, says **Yassamine Mather**

**T**wo demonstrations in Tehran this week have once again shown the way to deal with the threat of war against Iran. On May 26 students at Allameh Tabataba'i university organised protests with the slogans, "No to war", "No to sanctions" and "No to oppressors" - the last referring to the rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran. And, apart from the placards against war, the students also carried photos of those arrested on previous protests, as well as labour and student activists arrested in the last few years.

In their leaflet the students wrote: "Recent discourse has concentrated on the threat of war - some Iranian exiles encouraging war, while others are demanding an increase in sanctions." I assume this is a reference to those who have been promised US support by the Trump administration in any post-'regime change from above' administration, and have actually gone on air promoting war. One such idiot told a TV audience last week that the casualties of war will probably be no more than the number of people killed in traffic accidents in Iran - in other words, legitimising the devastation caused by military intervention. A number of Iranian 'human rights activists' in the US and Europe have also called for increased sanctions - to the horror of people inside the country.

The student leaflet also opposed sanctions, from which "it is the poorer classes who suffer". However, that did not mean that the students advocated support for the Iranian regime. They state:

When we say no to war and no to sanctions, we don't mean support for the 'security of the state'. What we are referring to is support for *the people* - the true victims of these harsh conditions. When we say, 'No to war, no to sanctions', we are not just referring to foreign oppressors: we are also addressing our own rulers. We are telling them, 'Don't gamble on the lives of ordinary people!' Using the excuse of possible foreign intervention, they have silenced opponents.

## No to apologists

The students made very clear what they thought of 'left' apologists for either the Tehran regime or US-led military intervention:

Protesting against internal injustice is an integral part of being anti-war. There are those who tell us that, under the current circumstances, 'You should support the government'. We reject becoming such apologists. Our slogan has two parts and neither part can have any meaning without the other.

At the same time we emphasise we have nothing but contempt for the exiled opposition, who call for more sanctions, who encourage the warmongers. In our eyes there is no difference between them and the current rulers - they have no legitimacy. Our hatred of the status quo does not mean we will ever forget the excuses they have chosen to utter in support of their anti-human activities.

But we also say, 'No to the internal oppressors'. Today 90% of the Iranian population is working under contracts, in temporary jobs. Corruption and systematic discrimination has become institutionalised. Poverty



**Inflation running at 30%**

and unemployment have increased dramatically. More than 19 million Iranians are shanty-town dwellers, deprived of the most basic facilities. Under such circumstances reducing the threat to our security to that coming from outside is shameful. The current appalling situation is not just caused by sanctions - although no doubt sanctions have played an important role in worsening the plight of the majority, that is only part of the story.

The leaflet went on to expose the hypocrisy of the regime:

When the state talks about safety, we ask, 'Safety for whom?' How can we talk of safety, when every day we are witnessing the arrest and imprisonment of those who criticise the government or who protest against the current situation? Over the last decades the actions of Iran's rulers have had only one aim: to silence the opposition and not allow one single voice to be heard against the current order.

They have transformed universities into military garrisons, where every protest is attacked. Workers' strikes and protests, and teachers' demonstrations, are severely repressed - the workers arrested on May Day are still held in prison. Climate activists arrested last year are still in 'temporary detention'. Afghan workers, who are amongst the most exploited sections of society, are threatened with deportation. Leaders of the green movement [a reference to the 'reformist' leaders of the 2009 protests] have been held under house arrest for more than nine years ...

The conclusion was: "Yes, we face two enemies: one internal, the other external. But we have no intention of supporting one against the other." A demonstration with similar slogans was held on May 28 on Tehran University's main campus.

For those of us who founded Hands Off the People of Iran, all this is very encouraging. We could not have written a better statement summarising the situation, and this can only

encourage us to redouble our efforts around Hopi's founding slogan: 'No to war, no to sanctions, no to the Islamic Republic of Iran.'

Of course, this is not the same as the so-called 'third way', promoted by sections of the exiled Iranian 'left'. In reality this means support for war. Using weasel words learnt from their British counterparts, such as the social-imperialist Alliance for Workers' Liberty, these groups repeat the nonsense about the need to oppose Iran as a 'sub-imperialist power'! So they will not come out against any military intervention from actual imperialists - which no doubt will be labelled 'humanitarian', as it was in Libya and Syria ...

All this comes at a time when, despite Trump's aggressive foreign policy, the threat of war has dipped slightly since last week. No doubt this can change again very quickly, but there are signs that there might now be a delay before any military intervention. First came the news that the United States was deploying just 1,500 troops in the Middle East, although leaked White House memos had suggested that 120,000 troops could be sent to combat the 'Iran threat'.

Then came Donald Trump's conciliatory message. While visiting Japan, the US president told reporters he is not pursuing regime change in Iran - he just wants to stop Tehran from developing nuclear weapons: He added that Iran "has a chance to be a great country with the same leadership".

The comment has led to rumours that, despite denials, the Islamic Republic has embarked on negotiations with the United States - either through intermediaries or directly. As I have previously pointed out, there is no reason to doubt Iran's willingness to engage in secret negotiations. Of course, it could be that Trump has been advised that describing Iran as "a nation of terror" and promising "the official end of Iran", far from paving the way for a rebellion against the country's current rulers, has managed to strengthen the position of the religious state.

Be that as it may, Trump's comments have infuriated Iranian royalists and other supporters of 'regime change from above'. Reza Pahlavi, the son of

the former shah, tweeted that Iranians "can't rely on foreign powers" for regime change! This was rich, coming from a man whose grandfather, Reza Shah Pahlavi, came to power in 1921, thanks to the direct intervention of the British, and the man whose father, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, retained power only through a CIA-organised coup in 1953. The man who was busy spending the fortune he and his family took out of Iran in 1979 in casinos and leisure complexes until Trump brought him back to the political arena with promises of 'regime change from above'. No wonder Iranian royalists, who had invested so much in supporting neoconservative Republicans in the United States, are now so furious with Trump.

## Maximum pressure

Meanwhile, inside Iran, the currency has continued to nose-dive, while inflation is estimated to stand at around 30%. The departure of European firms, wary of further US-imposed sanctions, has increased the number of unemployed and partly employed, and it is clear that most Iranians, fearing a showdown with the United States, are opposed to 'regime change from above'. According to the *Financial Times*,

... as the republic tries to rebalance the economy, people have found some certainty in the uncertainty and have acted to lessen their economic vulnerability. Their resilience and hedging against rampant inflation will make it difficult for US hawks to push Iran towards the street protests - as in the 1979 revolution - and eventual regime change that they may seek.<sup>1</sup>

It is now more than three weeks since the start of the US-imposed ban on the purchase of Iranian oil. The Trump administration had declared this to be part of its "maximum pressure campaign" aimed at halting Iran's ballistic missile programme and stopping "its interventions in the region, notably its support for conflicts in Syria and Yemen". The *Wall Street Journal* states: "One month after the Trump administration said it would tighten its ban on Iran's oil sales, the

country's direct crude buyers have all but vanished."<sup>2</sup>

However, Iran's economy is surviving and it is clear that since April the government has mobilised all its forces to sell oil on the so-called 'grey market'. It is believed that Tehran is currently selling oil at much lower prices through private firms. There are also reports of oil tankers switching off their geo-transponders, which, according to AP News, means that such ships "disappear from the world's satellite tanker tracking matrix, essentially vanishing into the millions of miles of open ocean".<sup>3</sup> No wonder some refer to them as "ghost tankers".

According to Manouchehr Takin, a UK based oil and energy consultant,

Tankers loading Iranian crude could bypass US sanctions by operating under the radar and making it harder to track actual volumes of oil shipments ... when they get out on the open sea, they may switch off some of their signals, so they would not be tracked, and then change names or papers.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Iran has a long history of bypassing oil sanctions, particularly under Barack Obama. The problem for those wishing to police oil exports is the sheer size of the global market. It is estimated that there are around 4,500 tankers carrying two billion barrels of crude per year in something like 140 million square miles of ocean.

In the last few weeks we have also heard reports of attempts to smuggle Iranian oil, and foreign minister Javad Zarif has also hinted at selling it in currencies other than the US dollar. Of course, in pursuing all these policies - thus maintaining a level of income from oil as well as the non-oil sector - Iran's rulers realise these can only be short-term tactics in a country that is gradually moving towards deep recession.

Economic growth was estimated at around 3.7% in 2017, but, following the re-imposition of US sanctions in 2018 (affecting energy, shipping and financial sectors), Iran's gross domestic product shrunk by 3.9%, according to the International Monetary Fund, and it is estimated that the country's economy will shrink by another 6% in 2019.

Iran's rulers hope they will only need to pursue policies aimed at bypassing oil sanctions until the end of the first Trump presidency or at worst his second term in 2025. But at this stage it is difficult to predict the future for either Iran's oil-dependent economy or the current regime. However, given the growing discontent, particularly amongst the youth, combined with opposition to war, sanctions and regime change from above, it is clear that it is only the Iranian people who can replace the current regime with something better. All other options, including military intervention, will either create disaster on a scale far worse than what we have seen in Syria, Iraq and Libya, or even tighten the Shia clergy's grip on power ●

## Notes

1. [www.ft.com/content/75a246d8-8062-11e9-9935-ad75bb96c849?fbclid=IwAR2Z3DUvOOGsiIbvL\\_Bo5jh4Y1eBrJJuovLFwHlqghY3d8e0E66eG-SqSg](https://www.ft.com/content/75a246d8-8062-11e9-9935-ad75bb96c849?fbclid=IwAR2Z3DUvOOGsiIbvL_Bo5jh4Y1eBrJJuovLFwHlqghY3d8e0E66eG-SqSg).
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# Negations of democratic centralism

**Mike Macnair** completes his series of articles dealing with the issues raised by the collapse of the US International Socialist Organization

In the first two articles in this series I tried to explain how the 1920-21 version of 'democratic centralism' was based on rational - but in hindsight mistaken - decisions by the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) in 1918-21, and has subsequently become merely an ideology of 'left' versions of managerialism.<sup>1</sup>

In the third, I looked at the original adoption of 'democratic centralism' in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1905-06, its roots in the Social Democratic Party of Germany before that time, and its probable original meaning as involving the concept of an individual membership party, the rejection of 'labour monarchist' regimes of directly elected 'leaders', and as regulating relationships between centre and branches, and between elected committees and their electors.<sup>2</sup>

This fourth article has as its purpose, on the one side, to carry the argument to a slightly higher level of abstraction than the concrete history, and conversely, on the other, to return it to the more immediate or concrete issue of *alternatives to 'democratic centralism'* (in the RSDLP sense and its SPD roots, not in the 1920-21 sense).

It is not a full explanation, but merely as partial polemic about *some issues* which are related to the claim that the collapse of the International Socialist Organization in the USA is a failing of 'democratic centralism' in general.

## Capitalist rule and bourgeois parties

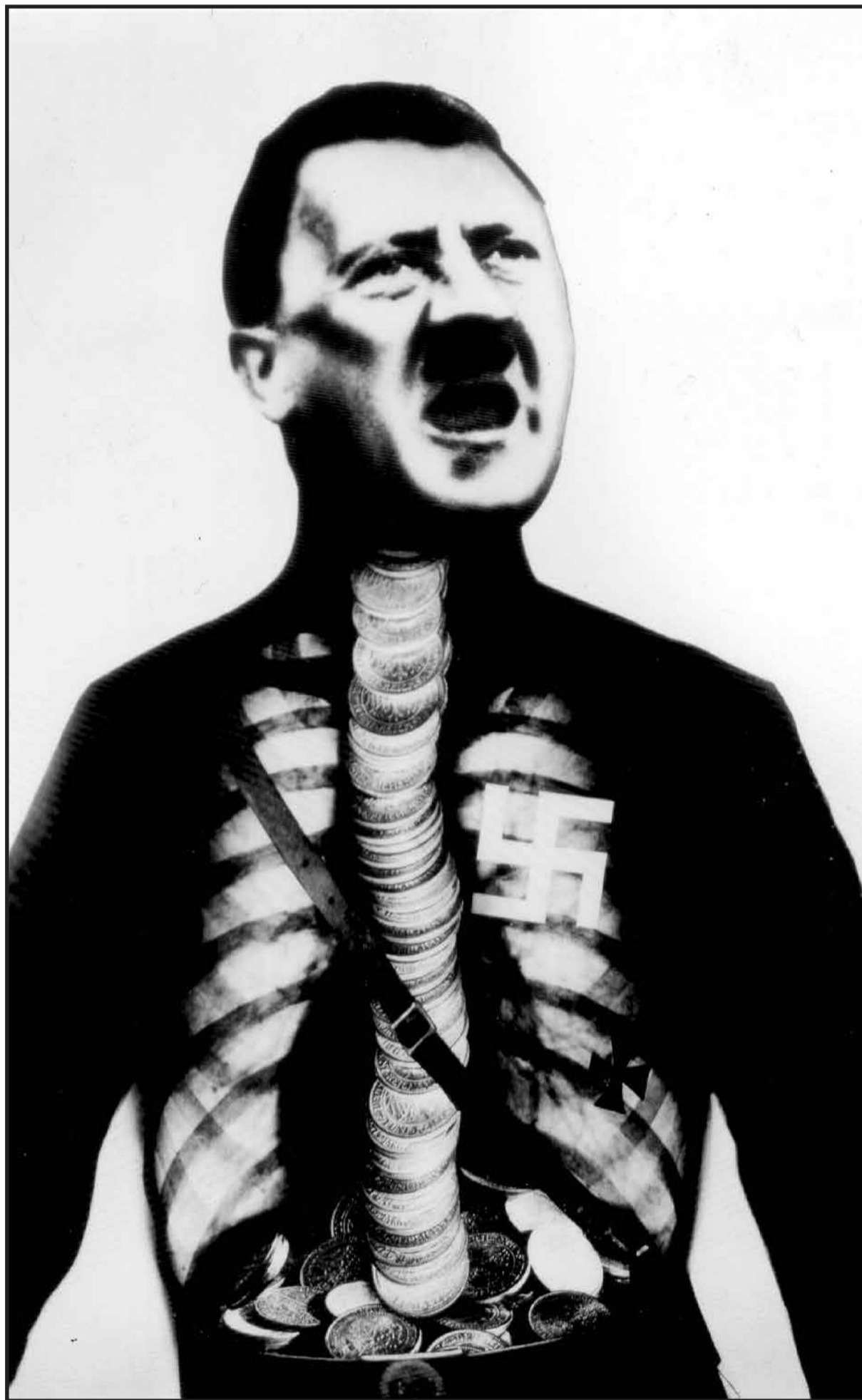
I begin in what may seem to be an odd place: how the capitalist class rules, and how this affects the form of the bourgeois political parties. I begin here because the early political movement of the working class inherits this form, and because there is a periodic hankering for it among the modern left (an example used in the arguments about the collapse of the ISO is Hal Draper's arguments of the early 1970s<sup>3</sup>).

'Bourgeois democracy' is an oxymoron. If capital was free to choose without external constraints, its form of rule would be a cooptative oligarchy: the forms of the Venetian republic, the 'regents' of the 17th-18th century Netherlands United Provinces - and the modern City of London Corporation, though this has an elective *form*: one in which businesses greatly outnumber individual voters.<sup>4</sup>

Even in such a form, capitalists would usually govern through paid agents - lawyers and the like. Unlike feudal aristocrats, capitalists do not get legitimacy from their ability to govern, but from their character as 'wealth creators' (their profits). Governing is a side issue, which they often hand to paid agents.

In practice, the capitalist class is a small minority, whose growth unavoidably implies a substantial working class. It needed the support of (at least) the petty bourgeoisie - small business and the urban middle classes more generally - to win power in the first place. It continues to need their support (and/or some degree of alliance with the rural classes) to hold the working class in subordination.

The standard form of the pre-SPD capitalist political party reflects the second and third of these characteristics: paid agents, and the winning of petty bourgeois support. It consists of a combination of two basic elements. The first is a group of



**John Heartfield: 'Adolf the superman swallows gold and spouts junk' (June 1932)**

**Capitalist parties rely on capitalist money for their managerial regimes and corrupt practices**

'professional politicians' at the centre - the agents referred to above - in some form of parliamentary caucus, and/or social clubs, with their journalistic hangers-on and related interventions in the press. This is the bit which is *normally* the locus of national-level corruption. The second element is analogous local groupings of the small capitalists and petty bourgeois, with local attorneys, and so on, in *local* clubs and societies, loosely affiliated to the national grouping and linked by its 'brand' ('Whig', 'Tory' and so on). This is the locus of *local* corruption. It works as such because the horizons of the petty bourgeoisie as a class are inherently local.

This works as a social form, and hence as an effective political form, *because* it is the form of the linkage between the professional politicians (attorneys and the like included) and the large capitalists at the centre, and the small capitalists and petty bourgeois in the localities.

To imitate this as a form of working class political organisation is therefore delusive. To create such a form *without the money inputs of the large and small capitalists* would be merely to create a form which would be unable to act effectively. On the local scale, as on the national scale, the loose coalition form could not mobilise enough small contributions

in money and in unpaid work from working class people to allow it to outweigh the contributions of capital on the other side.

## Political action

This lesson of the need for an organised and subscription-paying individual membership had, in fact, already been learned in relation to *trade unions* well before the first adoption of an individual-membership model for a workers' political party - which was the work of Lassalle's 1863 *Open letter* and the formation of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein (ADAV).

The other principal immediate element of the idea of the *Open letter* was the need for working class independent political action. On this front, Lassalle argued ideas which he held in common with Marx, Engels and their co-thinkers, and which went back to the ideas of the Communist League of 1848-52: that the working class must first form an independent political party to fight for universal suffrage, in order to pursue its class ends.

As to what the class should do with universal suffrage once it had it, Lassalle's proposals were very different from those of Marx and his co-thinkers. Indeed, Lassalle counterposed his proposals to trade unionism, where Marx and Engels at the same period endeavoured to work with trade unionists in the First International.

But the basic point of *political action as the immediate task* was common to Marxists and Lassalleans. It was opposed alike by the Proudhonists, who counterposed the construction of cooperatives,<sup>5</sup> and by the Bakuninists, who counterposed the idea of the general strike and insurrectionary overthrow of the state, and damned Marxists and Lassalleans alike on the basis that "All the German socialists believe that the political revolution must precede the social revolution. This is a fatal error."<sup>6</sup>

Karl Marx wrote a letter to Friedrich Bolte in November 1871, explaining criticisms of the Proudhonist and Bakuninist opponents of working class political action, as well as of the Lassalleans. At the end of the letter, he wrote:

NB as to political movement: The political movement of the working class has as its object, of course, the conquest of political power for the working class, and for this it is naturally necessary that a previous organisation of the working class, itself arising from their economic struggles, should have been developed up to a certain point.

On the other hand, however, every movement in which the working class comes out as a class against the ruling classes and attempts to force them by pressure from without is a political movement. For instance, the attempt in a particular factory or even a particular industry to force a shorter working day out of the capitalists by strikes, etc, is a purely economic movement. On the other hand, the movement to force an eight-hour day, etc, law is a political movement. And in this way, out of the separate economic movements of the workers there grows up everywhere a political movement - that is to say, a movement of the class - with the

# ISO

object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion. If these movements presuppose a certain degree of previous organisation, they are themselves equally a means of the development of this organisation.

Where the working class is not yet far enough advanced in its organisation to undertake a decisive campaign against the collective power - ie, the political power of the ruling classes - it must at any rate be trained for this by continual agitation against and a hostile attitude towards the policy of the ruling classes. Otherwise it will remain a plaything in their hands, as the September revolution in France showed, and as is also proved up to a certain point by the game messrs Gladstone and co are bringing off in England even up to the present time.<sup>7</sup>

The basic conception of working class political action is also reflected in Marx's posthumously published 1874 *Conspectus of Bakunin's statism and anarchy*:

[Bakunin]: If there is a state [*gosudarstvo*], then there is unavoidably domination [*gospodstvo*], and consequently slavery. Domination without slavery, open or veiled, is unthinkable - this is why we are enemies of the state. What does it mean, the proletariat organised as ruling class?

[Marx:]: It means that the proletariat, instead of struggling sectionally against the economically privileged class, has attained a sufficient strength and organisation to employ general means of coercion in this struggle. It can, however, only use such economic means to abolish its own character as salariat, hence as class. With its complete victory its own rule thus also ends, as its class character has disappeared.<sup>8</sup>

This issue has a surprisingly intimate connection with the issue of 'democratic centralism' and the ISO's collapse. The ISO - like the rest of that part of the left which maintains commitments to 'new left' ideas - abandoned the Marxist idea of 'political action' in favour of an 'anti-parliamentarism'; which is, in effect, a variant on Bakunin's argument. The route to this view was a vulgarisation of the (already weak) arguments of Rosa Luxemburg in *The mass strike*,

and a fetish of her (and the wider German SPD far left's) attempt to pursue a 'policy of the offensive' through mass action in 1910-11. A vulgarisation, because the proposed offensive in 1910-11 was precisely around the *constitutional* issue of suffrage, not around some economic strike, or some popular liberal idea, or piece of lesser-evilism.

The result is that, in place of "the object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion" and of training the working class "by continual agitation against and a hostile attitude towards the policy of the ruling classes", we have offered to us - by the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, the US ISO and all sorts of similar organisations - the promotion of any ideas which happen to be currently popular in the hope that they may result in street and/or workplace mobilisations.

On the one hand, this has precisely the consequence that the workers' movement and the left remain a 'plaything in the hands' of the capitalist politicians, who can drag it from tail-ending them, in fetishising one bit of media outrage, to fetishising another and opposite one.

We can, in fact, see precisely this at work in the identity-politics aspect of the ISO collapse: tailing successively mobilisations round racial and gender identity politics, the organisation became so identity-political that it could not survive the shock of having its own 'MeToo' scandals.

This was already a visible problem in the 1850s-60s, since capitalist and other political managers already deployed one or another distraction to demobilise workers' movements, split strikes, and so on. It was this experience which made Lassalle's *Open letter* in Germany, and the idea of the First International in Britain and France, attractive. The effect of moving into suffrage campaigning was very visible in Britain, where its result was both a limited extension of the suffrage in 1867 and the 1871 attempt to legalise trade unions.

On the other hand, if we suppose that the task of a 'revolutionary party' is not to push forward *political* proposals, but to promote street mobilisations and strikes, then 'democratic centralism' is necessarily driven towards bureaucratic centralism. The reason is that there is *inherently no space available* for tactical divergences and local or sectoral creativity. If the whole point

of 'politics' is to get the maximum turnout on the latest anti-racist demo (or whatever), someone at the centre *has* to take micro-management decisions, and everyone else *has* to play the role of followers (or rentacrowd).

This was already visible before 1914 in Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches and their co-thinkers' Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, and in Daniel de Leon's Socialist Labour Party - both organisations committed to direct actionism, both plain bureaucratic-centralist sects. Indeed, there is a sense in which it was already present in Bakunin's 'invisible dictatorship': the idea of the spontaneous revolutionary movement, by refusing the need for *ordinary* decision-making processes, generates hidden centralism.<sup>9</sup> Since the emergence of the new left in the later 1950s, and more particularly since organisations of this type of a significant size developed in the late 1960s-70s, the apparent paradox has been stunningly visible, that the advocates of 'socialism from below' turn out to be *particularly* driven to bureaucratic centralism.

## Against labour monarchism

*Particularly* driven to bureaucratic centralism - not *uniquely* drawn. I already referred last week to Lassalle's argument, applied after him by Schweitzer, for concentrating the multiple wills of the members of the ADAV into a single will of the elected president of the party. This particular argument was a sub-Hegelianism. But the idea that parties, and other organisations, must have *single* leaders - or directly elected single officers answerable to the membership rather than to some leading committee - is a much more widespread belief.

It grows out of the norms of bourgeois management and government: all the way back to John Lambert's arguments in the 1650s for the necessity of a 'single person' executive (ie, Oliver Cromwell as lord protector), through the invention of the 'prime minister' as a substitute monarch, and still reflected in the legal requirement that every registered political party have a 'leader' under the rules made in Tony Blair's anti-democratic Registration of Political Parties Act 1998 and its successor, the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.<sup>10</sup> Behind this very long-standing commitment to one-man management is the *prima facie* tyrannical character of the sphere of production itself under capitalism, as Marx famously remarked in *Capital* Vol 1:

The consumption of labour-power is completed, as in the case of every other commodity, outside the limits of the market or of the sphere of circulation. Accompanied by Mr Moneybags and by the possessor of labour-power, we therefore take leave for a time of this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in view of all men, and follow them both into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face 'No admittance except on business'. Here we shall see not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making.

This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity - say of labour-power - are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they

come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own ...

On leaving this sphere of simple circulation or of exchange of commodities, which furnishes the 'free-trader vulgaris' with his views and ideas, and with the standard by which he judges a society based on capital and wages, we think we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*. He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but - a hiding.<sup>11</sup>

In reality, one-man management is an *ideology* or *apologetic representation* of the right of the capitalist to hold the worker in subordination. The 'single person' *cannot* manage affairs without collaborators. The absolute Roman emperor required his *consilium* or later *consistory* (the latter imitated by the papacy); the 'single person', Cromwell, needed a protectoral council; the Stalinist bureaucracy after Stalin was able to speak about 'collegial management'.<sup>12</sup> Very recent British political events have shown that Theresa May, in spite of her formal electoral mandate, was unable to carry her cabinet with her after a series of parliamentary defeats, and was

forced to resign. The *Führerprinzip* - the 'principle' that there has to be an individual leader - proves to have inherent limits discreetly hidden by the media's fetishes of leaders.<sup>13</sup>

## Decisions

In spite of this ideological aspect, we are here at the core of the issue. We need to organise to conduct collective political action. This need has two sides, which are not *obviously* in tension with each other, but are, in fact, in tension in a more complicated way.

The first side is that we need to have means of taking collective decisions about what to do in our common actions. The second is that we need to actually mobilise the labour, skills, creativity and resources of the members of a party (or a campaign) in order for that party to be able to counterweight the money resources available to big capital on the international and national scale, and to small capital on the local scale.

We need to have means of taking collective decisions about what to do in our common actions. *Disagreement is normal for human beings* and hence for workers' organisations. Without decisions, there can be no common actions. This is on its face a completely banal point. The question is *what* means of deciding.

For some purposes snap decisions do indeed require that we delegate power to one individual, if we are to get a decision at all. A single example from my own experience is a mass picket-line in Oxford in the 1970s, which was attacked by the far right. There needed to be (but was not) a *chief steward* to decide how we should respond to this attack.

At the opposite extreme, there are some issues which it is educational

# Anti-Corbyn

It is unfortunately no surprise that the Equalities and Human Rights Commission has opened an official investigation into the Labour Party.

Any kind of neutral body would have had to immediately dismiss the complaints lodged by the Jewish Labour Movement and the so-called Campaign Against Anti-Semitism. These organisations have no interest in fighting racism: their only purpose is to get rid of a certain Jeremy Corbyn. They have been blatant in their political opposition to the twice elected leader of the Labour Party - and have actively plotted against him from day one.

According to *The Guardian*, the EHRC will investigate "whether the party has unlawfully discriminated against, harassed or victimised people because they are Jewish" and if "the party and its employees have committed unlawful acts of discrimination or failed to respond to complaints of unlawful acts in an efficient and effective manner".

If there has been unlawful discrimination by Labour against Jewish people, it is against Jewish anti-Zionists. Many of those, as well as black members, are involved in the struggle for Palestinian rights, which explains the disproportionate number of expulsions and suspensions of black and Jewish comrades.

However, the recent victory of Stan Keable in his employment tribunal shows what happens when these types of cases are put before a real judge: they are laughed out of court (see [www.labouragainsthewitchhunt.org](http://www.labouragainsthewitchhunt.org)). Stan was fired for stating that in the 1930s the Zionist movement

collaborated with the Nazi regime - a well documented, if shameful, historical fact. The judge defended the right to express anti-Zionist views - even if they offend people.

Labour HQ should call this campaign what it is: part of the rightwing witch-hunt against Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters. The Labour leader remains an unreliable ally from the ruling class's point of view, especially given his strong support for the rights of Palestinians.

The expulsion of Alistair Campbell, though welcome, does not change the overall picture. MPs like Margaret Hodge, Louise Ellman and Tom Watson insult, disrupt, make bogus accusations and work hand in glove with the capitalist media - with no repercussions coming their way. Those making false charges ought to face justice at last.

Their outrageous behaviour goes unpunished because of the short-sighted and futile attempts to appease the right. This can only undermine the Corbyn leadership and play into the false 'Anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism' narrative. Apparently, it is now "common knowledge" that Jeremy Corbyn is "responsible for anti-Semitism inside and outside the Labour Party", as Ruth Smeeth MP recently claimed. The leadership's appeasement is designed to stop more rightwingers leaving and to get Corbyn into 10 Downing Street. But appeasement has never worked in the past - and it is demonstrably failing now ●

**Labour Against the Witchhunt**  
[www.labouragainsthewitchhunt.org](http://www.labouragainsthewitchhunt.org)

## Fighting fund

# Over the line?

Thanks this week go in particular to TDB, who has just paid his £60 annual subscription via PayPal. The only thing is, he doesn't want to receive a copy of the print version, as he now reads the *Weekly Worker* online. In other words, it's an annual donation to our fighting fund. That's the spirit, comrade!

Another PayPal donor was MG, who chipped in with £10, while we received five regular standing order payments from DG (£60), JT (£50), SS and GT (£15 each) and AR (£10). The last named comrade was also our third and final PayPal donor - he likes to use two methods for his monthly total of £15!

Finally, we received two cheques - yes, some people are still that old-fashioned! Thanks go to FD for her £20 and to MN, whose note accompanying his £20 donation reads: "I always turn first to your letters - what a contrast

to the rest to read such genuine debate." That's what we're here for, comrade.

And, showing that MN is by no means the only reader who appreciates the role of the *Weekly Worker*, our fighting fund total for May has now reached £1,822. There's one problem though - the target is £2,000, so, as I write, we only have two days left to raise another £178. I reckon we're going to need quite a few comrades to click on that PayPal button - or better still - make a bank transfer (sort code 30-99-64, account number 00744310). The second method is not only just as quick - there's no charge either.

Please do your best to help us over the line ●

**Robbie Rix**

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# weekly worker

**Biggest  
evil should  
not set our  
agenda**

# Silent treatment

The failure of some left groups to back the Labour Party is the fruit of deep-rooted problems in method, argues Paul Demarty

The prime minister's resignation in advance of the European election result said a great deal about what was likely to be in them. A fractious, fratricidal Tory Party could hardly be expected to beat the mother of all protest votes.

The result, however, was also a sobering one for Labour. While the prevailing media line in the wake of the local elections that both parties had suffered equally was transparently false and self-serving, it would be very much harder to make that case here. A poor third place to the Liberal Democrats is not something Labour can easily brush off, not least because it stems from a political tactic of deliberate vagueness and negativity on the Brexit issue that is designed to win in elections to parliament in Westminster, not Brussels.

It was a weak offering last Thursday - a vote that was successfully turned into a plebiscite on Brexit both by the insurgent Brexit Party and the government's shambolic failure to deliver on its promises in this regard. (If there is to be a 'people's vote', you would almost have to call it a *third* referendum now.) As Lib Dems were often heard to remark after their Westminster wipe-out in 2015, if you stand in the middle of the road, you are liable to get run over. Thus it is not surprising to find the latest attempts to bounce Labour into support for a second referendum more successful than previously - a matter to which we shall return.

That said, the Labour leadership could be forgiven for hoping for just a little more help from people claiming to be on their side. The combined efforts of Britain's far-left groups, to be sure, were never going to move the needle too far; but the decision of some groups basically not even to bother demonstrates a profound political disorientation on their part.

We could start with the most absurd case, wherein the Socialist Party in England and Wales consciously decided not to make *any* voting recommendation - an extraordinary dereliction of duty. We can only speculate as to the immediate cause of this; perhaps the divisions opened up by Peter Taaffe, as he prosecutes a split in SPEW's pet 'international' are reaching closer to home than he would like.

It is undeniable that it is an awkward one for SPEW. There was no lash-up with the RMT union to be had, as with the laughable No2EU in 2009; so it was basically Labour or a boycott. Voting Labour would raise questions as to SPEW's wider electoral tactics - after all, it insists on refusing to vote in local elections for rightwing Labour candidates who do not promise to run illegal no-cuts budgets, and the Labour lists for the EU parliament brook no distinction between establishment remainer types and shiny new Corbynites. A boycott was a possibility, but one already implemented to wide derision by the *Morning Star's*

Communist Party of Britain. So that leaves embarrassed silence and foot-shuffling. Another political triumph for the great helmsman, Taaffe!

### We did it!

As Peter Manson noted in last week's paper, the Socialist Workers Party did in the end get round to recommending a vote for Labour, in a piece by Alex Callinicos:

In the short term, the only force standing in the way of this prospect [of a Boris Johnson government] electorally is Labour under Corbyn. Therefore what we need to see on Thursday is the biggest possible Labour vote.<sup>1</sup>

This is a perfectly reasonable analysis. Yet if it was so important to get the biggest possible Labour vote, would it have killed the comrades to have mentioned it more than two days beforehand? Instead, the SWP - mainly via its Stand Up to Racism front - had focused almost entirely on opposing the UK Independence Party and Tommy Robinson's 'independent' ticket in the North West constituency. In the wake of the election, things are no different - very much the leading item on Charlie Kimber's hot take is the defeat of that perfidious Stephen Yaxley-Lennon:

Anti-racists were celebrating in North West England as, after a campaign by Stand Up To Racism, fascist Tommy Robinson failed to be elected. He took just two percent of the vote and lost his deposit.

Nahella Ashraf, from Manchester Stand Up To Racism said: "We have shown that there is no place in mainstream politics for a fascist. I'd like to thank the hundreds of activists that came out across the North West to make this happen. The campaign run by Stand Up To Racism showed that we can pull people together regardless of how they voted in the EU referendum. However, we cannot be complacent."<sup>2</sup>

Comrade Nahella's sign-off is, of course, unintentionally hilarious to all outside the impenetrable outrage bubble of the modern SWP. Spending the whole period of an election campaign hysterically talking up the importance of a no-hoper candidate and a party in utter disarray that was clearly facing wipe-out, and

then claiming credit for their failure on the day - surely there has been no greater display of political complacency since (alas!) the 2017 Tory manifesto.

As we have noted repeatedly in these pages, the distinct peculiarity of SWP campaigning in this period has been the almost total absence of Farage's Brexit Party and the Tory right from its calculations. At first sight, this sits a little oddly with the argument made by Alex Callinicos already cited in favour of a Labour vote - that the dynamic is towards a far-right-leaning Tory government led by Boris Johnson or similar, and cosyng up to Donald Trump. This seemed, to put it mildly, both a far more likely and a far *worse* outcome than Robinson making it to a virtually powerless parliament on his own ever could have been.

There is, however, a hidden link. Callinicos's argument is not, remember, in favour of a positive programme of intervention in the Labour Party, but merely to avoid the disaster of Britain under Boris. It is a lesser-evil policy. In this it is united with the other half of the SWP brain - chasing Tommy Robinson around with cold beverages and what-not, which is lesser-evilism reduced to the level of self-parody.

The main utility of lesser-evil politics for the SWP is its focus on, precisely, evil. There can be no doubt that Tommy Robinson is a thuggish, fascist scoundrel; nor can it be doubted that Ukip's latest leader, Gerard Batten, has adopted a conscious policy of bringing his party closer to the uglier European far-right outfits. It is thus trivially easy to get people in a fearful lather about Ukip and Robinson in a way that is certainly not so easy for Farage's grotesque rainbow coalition, which has dialled back the overt rightism so successfully (for now). It is certainly easier for groups, like the SWP, who still support Brexit (albeit a sugar-candy-mountain 'internationalist', 'anti-racist', etc Brexit).

The problem is that it clearly does not work. Remember Nahalla Ashraf, quoted above: "We have shown that there is no place in mainstream politics for a fascist." Leave aside the question of why the SWP is so concerned to preserve the virtue of "mainstream politics"; it is an utterly empty victory, in a wider political context that saw a triumphant performance for a party of the far right and likely to soon shed its fig leaf of non-partisanship, and a great stride towards a Tory Party - and a Tory *government* - seriously infected and led by far-right politics.

The underlying problem is simple. The SWP's protest fetishism leads it to treat everything in social life as a series of isolated, individual issues - and in fact SPEW's method is the same, although it does, at least, also fetishise routine trade unionism, bringing much-needed variety to proceedings. In both *Socialist Worker* and *The Socialist*, we are often told that such and such an issue (be it women's oppression, anti-racism, nationalist separatism or whatever else) must be linked to the struggle against austerity and capitalism - or variations thereof. Yet the use of the passive voice exposes the entirely formal, external link being made: the link, such as it is, is that the SWP (or SPEW) happens to have a bee in its bonnet about both.

### Plebiscite

It is - if perhaps an accident - nonetheless appropriate from the poetic point of view that this method should be so decisively shown up by the political crisis caused by the Brexit vote. For what it amounts to is an essentially *plebiscitary* view of politics. An issue is posed, and a decision must be made *now*, without deliberation or subtlety, and then 'linked' to more fundamental matters after the fact. It so happens that, in this case, the SWP, SPEW and the *Morning Star's* CPB adhered to their organisations' historic opposition to the European 'capitalist club', but their wider milieu in the labour movement and among right-on youth are overwhelmingly on the opposite side, which leads to their particular paralysis and shamefaced silence. But it would hardly be an improvement if they were simply to switch teams.

Posing questions in this way caters to the most backward layers of the popular classes, offering them the semblance of meaningful participation in political decision-making. From the point of view of authentic democracy, this is a disaster - it divides classes and their parties around questions that turn out to be phantoms. In doing so, it diverts us from the fruitful combat of coherent world views and class leaderships, which alone offers the possibility of a choice that might actually mean anything.

Kimber spots some aspect of the problem when he writes:

Not everyone who voted for the Brexit Party is a racist, let alone a fascist. But racist Farage pulls in people who are angry at the political establishment and focuses

them towards Islamophobic and racist solutions.

Here is the nub of the matter: Brexitism - including in its predominant anti-migrant ('racist', in SWP terms) form - is not in reality an autochthonic urge to evil, but a diverted and backward form of class-consciousness. Thus, paradoxically, neither half of the SWP's intervention works: its splenetic anti-racism *will* be interpreted as elitism by the average working class Brexit voter; its own Brexit position *will* be interpreted as a concession to bigots and wrong 'uns by the radical youth.

The Labour Party's response to that problem, so far, has been to hold back from explicit remainism (and its dishonest proxy, the 'people's vote'), but to criticise the Brexit policy actually on offer from the Tories and demand a general election. As noted, this has served the leadership well on the whole, but very badly indeed last week. And so - it seems at the moment - Corbyn appears to be being pushed in the direction of support for a second referendum. This sets up a gruesome dynamic, whereby such a policy is forced through a fragmented parliament, and the Labour Party cast as the betrayer of the national will. It thereby sets itself up at the wrong end of a *Dolchstoßlegende* - conditions are clearly set up for a further lurch to the far right.

The alternative, for the SWP, is at last taking democracy seriously as a question in its own right, instead of merely contrasting the excitement of protest with the tedium of high politics. For those who take the Labour Party seriously as a site of struggle, it means fighting against the fear of short-term failure in this or that election, and instead for a policy of rebuilding from the base, so that wider layers of the class might be educated about the inherent interconnection of political issues and the fundamental standpoint of class. Then, the crooked demagogues of the far right would be robbed of the prolier-than-thou shtick, and the right-on social liberals divested of their unearned influence in the official labour movement.

The question is getting more urgent ●

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### Notes

- <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/48371/Farage+has+benefited+from+ruling+class+splits>
- <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/48399/Euro+elections+see+political+crisis%2C+and+the+racists+make+some+gains>

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