



communist review

THEORY AND DISCUSSION JOURNAL OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY No 31 WINTER 2000 £1.50

New wave of anti-communism	KENNY COYLE
Marxism and religion	GEOFF BOTTOMS
West European Left	KATE HUDSON
Social partnership in Ireland	PEGGY PRIOR
Moscow and liberation	BLADE NZIMANDE
Rehabilitating socialist realism	NICK WRIGHT
Hard labour for women	ANNE KANE



UnityBooks

SCOTLAND'S LEFT PROGRESSIVE BOOKSHOP



72 Waterloo Street Glasgow G2 7DA
Phone/fax 0141 204 1611

A wide range of progressive literature
including marxist classics, works by modern
marxists and books and pamphlets on peace
environmental and third world politics

LLYFRAU 'Beca RebeccaBOOKS

Hanes	History
Gwleidyddiaeth	Politics
Economeg	Economics
Cymru	Wales
Y Trydydd Byd	The Third World
Menywod	Women
Linyddiaeth	Literature
Cymdeithaseg	Sociology
Astudiaethau Duon	Black Studies
Iwerddon	Ireland
Cymraeg	Welsh Language
Nofelau	Fiction
Diwylliant	Culture
Marcisiaeth	Marxism
Y Cyfryngau	The Media
Iechyd ac Addysg	Health and Education
Yr Amgylchedd	Environment

**Dyma'r dewis ehangaf o lyfrau gan Wasg Prifysgol
Cymru, Seren, Lawrence & Wishart, Pluto, Verso,
Gwasg Gomer, Pathfinder ac eraill ar y prisiau isaf!**

**For the widest range of books from the University of
Wales Press, Seren, Lawrence & Wishart, Pluto, Verso,
Gwasg Gomer, Pathfinder**

Bob Dydd SADWRN 10am-5pm EVERY SATURDAY

**Anfoner amlen wedi'i stampio am restr er mwyn
archebu drwy'r post**

**Send SAE for mail order catalogue
Canolfan Caerdydd ar gyfer Astudiaethau Undebol
Cardiff Centre for Trade Union Studies
131 Crwys Road Cathays Caerdydd Cardiff CF2 4NH
01222 390273**



communist review

**THEORY AND DISCUSSION
JOURNAL OF THE
COMMUNIST PARTY**
NUMBER 31 WINTER 2000
ISSN 0950-2416

EDITORIAL BOARD

MARY DAVIS EDITOR
KENNY COYLE ASSISTANT EDITOR
ANDY CHAFFER MARK DAVID-GRAY
JOHN FOSTER KEN FULLER
KEVIN HALPIN RICHARD HART
JOHN HAYLETT JOHN KELLY
MARJ MAYO ELIZABETH WILSON
ANITA WRIGHT NICK WRIGHT

EDITORIAL OFFICES

UNIT F11 CAPE HOUSE
787 COMMERCIAL ROAD
LONDON E14 7HG
e-mail wrightnick@compuserve.com

PREPARED FOR PRESS FEBRUARY 2000
ADVERTISING RATES ON REQUEST
SIGNED ARTICLES DO NOT NECESSARILY
REFLECT THE VIEWS OF THE EDITORS
OR THE COMMUNIST PARTY

CONTENTS

2	EDITORIAL	
3	IDEOLOGY NEW WAVE OF ANTI COMMUNISM	KENNY COYLE
9	DISCUSSION MARXISM AND RELIGION	GEOFF BOTTOMS
14	POLITICS THE WEST EUROPEAN LEFT	KATE HUDSON
19	LABOUR SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP IN IRELAND	PEGGY PRIOR
20	POLITICS HARD LABOUR FOR WOMEN	ANNE KANE
25	CULTURE REHABILITATING SOCIALIST REALISM	NICK WRIGHT
27	REVIEWS WOMEN AND CLASS	ANITA WRIGHT
30	MOSCOW AND SOUTH AFRICA	BLADE NZIMANDE
32	A FUTURE FOR PUBLIC OWNERSHIP	JOHN FOSTER

CONTRIBUTORS

KENNY COYLE LEADS THE INTERNATIONAL WORK OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

GEOFF BOTTOMS IS A PRIEST AND MEMBER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

KATE HUDSON LECTURES IN EAST EUROPEAN POLITICS

NICK WRIGHT IS A MORNING STAR JOURNALIST

PEGGY PRIOR TEACHES TRADE UNION STUDIES

ANITA WRIGHT IS A PRIMARY HEADTEACHER

JOHN FOSTER IS PROFESSOR OF APPLIED SOCIAL STUDIES AT PAISLEY UNIVERSITY

BLADE NZIMANDE IS GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNIST PARTY

ANN KANE IS A MEMBER OF THE LABOUR PARTY

COVER

Detail from Lunch Hour
painted in 1937 by Nina Korotova
depicts women construction workers in central Asia



Holding up half the sky

INTERNATIONAL Women's Day on March 8 has long been a feature in the left's calendar. However, ensuring that the women's question remains on the labour movement's agenda has not always been an easy task. Ann Kane offers an insightful critique of New Labour's approach to women and the family and finds it wanting.

Especially important is "the long campaign by women party members for policy and structural changes which would allow the party to be more representative of women".

The revised and updated version of the Communist Party pamphlet *Women and Class* is reviewed in this issue by Anita Wright. The pamphlet sets out not only to equip women and men to better fight women's oppression but also to understand the complex roots that gave rise to it and reproduce it. We hope *Communist Review* readers will find a place for it on their bookshelves and a sale among their colleagues.

Geoff Bottoms reopens the debate on Marxism and religion and correctly warns us of the dangers of sectarian approaches to religious believers. Himself a Catholic priest, Geoff Bottoms looks at the impact of Liberation Theology in the light of the social teaching of the Catholic Church. His conclusions bear close study by believers (of all persuasions) and non-believers alike.

The crude revival of anti-communism is the subject of a two-part article by Kenny Coyle. In this first part, he looks at some of the underlying philosophical origins of this 'New Wave' and how this has been translated into a major and widespread ideological onslaught on Marxism that has re-emerged in the mainstream bourgeois liberal press.

In an article that we hope will spark renewed debate and further discussion, including from friends abroad, Kate

Hudson offers a perspective on the West European left at the turn of the millennium. Kate Hudson particularly concentrates on the various forms of co-operation between communist and left socialists and the varying forms of alliances this takes. She also analyses the role of those parties originating from the communist tradition in eastern Germany and Scandinavia.

The history of Soviet art comes under the scrutiny of Nick Wright, who discusses conventional and simplistic appraisals of Socialist Realism. He traces the reception of Socialist Realism not only through its interaction with earlier Soviet and Russian cultural trends but also its confrontation with US-sponsored abstract art.

James Connolly's watchword that "The cause of labour is the cause of Ireland and the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour" provides a useful backdrop to Peggy Prior's review of a new pamphlet from the Irish Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union which warns of "the illusion of partnership" in the Republic of Ireland, but with definite lessons for us here.

We also carry in this issue a review by Blade Nzimande – general secretary of the South African Communist Party – of Vladimir Shubin's book on Soviet support for the national liberation movement in South Africa, a frank account which sets the record straight on a number of disputed issues.

KENNY COYLE

A woman miner
from 1860



New wave of anti-communism

Kenny Coyle



A DECADE after the 'death of communism', right-wing ideologists still feel it necessary to exorcise its 'spectre'. A new wave of crude anti-communism has emerged. This article seeks to understand why and to offer some necessary rebuttals to it.

In 1997, *The Black Book of Communism* appeared in France and has recently been published in an English translation. Edited by Stéphane Courtois, a former Maoist, the book purports to document the 'crimes of communism', estimating around 100 million victims in the course of the 20th century. Courtois has argued that:

"Recent emphasis on the singularity of the genocide of the Jews, by concentrating attention on an exceptional atrocity, blurs our perception of affairs of the same order in the Communist world."

Since then, similar estimates have entered the mainstream media, apparently unchallenged. In part two, we will look at how these figures are compiled and show the underlying statistical dishonesty and outright falsification on which these figures are based. Needless to say, these busy academics are not thought to be compiling a 'Black Book' of the crimes of colonialism, imperialism, or capitalism in general.

This first section examines the ideological origins and impact of this anti-communist 'New Wave'.

The first point is that there is, in essence, little new about the arguments being put forward, which are familiar enough from British and US Cold War debates. The wider political and historical context, and direct intellectual influences, though, are different.

The most intellectually sophisticated cases against Marxism during the Cold War were put forward in Britain, where the influence of Marxism was relatively weak compared with many other European countries. This in itself is interesting given the stereotypical British disdain for 'theory' of any kind, and a preference for 'facts'. It is perhaps significant that three key writers, in what I will call 'The Old School', were foreign-born and were perhaps more inclined to respond to the intellectual challenge Marxism presented.¹

The key texts are Sir Karl Popper's *The Open*

Society and its Enemies (published 1945) and *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), the work of Isaiah Berlin and in the economic field, FA Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). These became standard anti-Marxist works and required reading in many British universities. Without lumping their arguments and fields together, we can summarise their arguments.

■ Although Marxism has pretensions to be a scientific theory, in fact, the behaviour of men and women in society is not governed by 'laws' as atoms are in physical sciences. There cannot therefore be a 'scientific socialism'.

■ It follows that attempts to elaborate political and economic programmes on the basis of these false laws is not only doomed to failure but will violate the freedom of individuals.

■ Individual freedom is the surest road to progress and attempts to limit the freedom of individuals are contrary to human nature, which is naturally individualistic not collectivist.

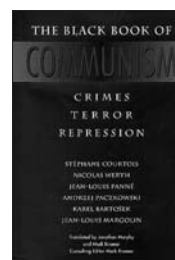
■ It is not possible to understand history as the fruits of struggles between classes, which are by definition collective entities.

■ Marxism is a dogma of 'historicism' since it maps out the inevitable stages of human society and makes unscientific predictions about the future.

■ Because Marxists regard their theory as scientific, they are inevitably intolerant of competing theories and veer toward totalitarian dictatorships, since Marxists believe they alone possess absolute.

Of course, these arguments were directed, in effect, at a mechanical model of Marxism rather than the considerably more sophisticated views of the real Marx and Lenin. This assault was also launched during the latter years of the Stalin period. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the USSR had suffered enormous destruction. There was the genuine and realistic fear of a new world war, this time with atomic weapons. This provided the backdrop for a renewed siege mentality in the socialist camp that became almost paranoid at times in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

However, the idea of monolithic totalitarianism crumbled once the greatly expanded socialist camp began to evolve more nationally specific models of



'Furet's method is essentially idealist. He seeks to disprove that the French Revolution was the product of struggles between members of classes whose conscious awareness, however partial and incomplete, of their actual conditions and material interests led them to overthrow the ancien regime. Furet argues that power "had no objective existence at the social level, it was but a mental presentation of the social sphere that permeated and dominated the field of politics".'

Picture is a detail from Liberty Guiding the People. 1830 by Delacroix



socialism (Tito's Yugoslavia, Mao's China, a little later Castro's Cuba etc.). Following 1956, de-Stalinisation greatly relaxed the atmosphere inside the USSR, although this was also based on a more confident assessment of the Soviet Union's security.

The experience and practice of Communist parties in capitalist countries also showed that far from being monoliths, the communist movement was increasingly diverse. By the late 60s, crude anti-communism was on the defensive, US imperialism's atrocities in Vietnam provided a focus for renewed anti-imperialist consciousness in the advanced capitalist countries. In the US, the struggle for black equality against widespread racism likewise undermined its rhetorical claims to be the guardian of democracy or the leader of the free world.

Marxism also began to excite the interest of new generations although the ideological and organisational fragmentation of the New Left often hindered its effectiveness. Yet it is from this generation of radical 68'ers that people such as Courtois come. Why?

In an *Observer* article, the Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton wrote:

"Few places in Europe are now more grotesquely misnamed than the Left Bank of Paris. Previously home to Chanel-style Maoists, tousled existentialists and insurrectionary students, its cafés are nowadays thronged with remorseful Trotskyites, recovering Stalinists, fake philosophical gurus and right-wing mystics. The Parisian stampede from Left to Right has outdone the rush to the Titanic lifeboats. Since the failed student insurgency of 1968, the French intellectual trend has been from Marx to Nietzsche, Leninism to libido, Bolshevism to black leather. Repentant Marxists declare consumerism to be the consummation of history, while those who once dug up the paving stones for barricades now dig up dirt on Jean-Paul Sartre.

The nation which invented the idea of revolution for the modern age now prefers to be known as the one which gave the world the word 'bourgeois'. Unlike the unphilosophical English, the French have not simply been content to swap their utopian visions for humdrum political realism. Instead, right-wing reaction has taken as exotic a form as their discarded revolutionism. Being French, you need some wild-eyed metaphysical theory of why not to grant your workers a wage increase, rather than just a dash of English pragmatism. Rather than tamely supporting the Gulf war, you declare instead, like the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard, that it never actually took place. The strong libertarian tradition in France can swing either towards revolution or anti-political irrationalism, and the surrealists trod a thin line between the two.

*In this kind of culture, radical scepticism is only ever an inch away from conservative cynicism."*²

It is indeed no accident that it is from France that the main proponents of the 'New Wave' have come.

Perry Anderson also noted that:

*"In the three decades or so after the Liberation, France came to enjoy a cosmopolitan paramountcy in the general Marxist universe that recalls in its own way something of the French ascendancy in the epoch of Enlightenment. The fall of this dominance was thus no mere national matter ... Paris today is the capital of European intellectual reaction"*³

For the generation that had built the Popular Front and took part in the resistance to Nazi occupation, the French Communist Party was neither a foreign agency nor a totalitarian conspiracy but a mass party of national liberation and popular democracy. So for the three decades or so after Liberation, to use Anderson's chronology, Marxism was entrenched in French society. This was not only because the largest political party and the unrivalled vanguard of the working class was the PCF, but also because in a variety of fields, from linguistics, anthropology, history and philosophy, non-Marxist academics were obliged to contest or accommodate Marxist ideas.

Various theories, such as Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the later rise of so-called 'post-structuralism', associated with Michel Foucault, took place in a setting where a critical engagement with Marxism was unavoidable. Indeed at some point, all these major thinkers initially regarded their work as either developing or acting in tandem with Marxism. There were therefore endless attempts to marry Marxism with a variety of non-Marxist concepts.

Anderson points to the critical role played by Louis Althusser, a PCF member who developed a Marxist philosophy that blended in the ideas of structuralism, in acting as an unwitting Trojan Horse for much of the ideas of this shift to the right.⁴ Althusser's influence was important in two senses. First, while never joining the French Maoist groups, he was greatly enthusiastic about the Cultural Revolution in China, seeing it as a means of overcoming what he had termed the 'Stalinian deviation'. The first Maoist student groups in France emerged directly out of the Communist student organisation, the UEC, with a strong presence in the Ecole Normale Supérieure, where Althusser taught.⁵ The second area was his interest in the psychoanalyst Lacan, from whom he borrowed piecemeal for his theories on ideology. The role of ideology, 'Ideological State Apparatuses', and thus of intellectuals was stressed.⁶

The exhilaration of the events of May 1968 swept up thousands of young intellectuals who believed they were on the verge of revolution. While one can be critical of aspects of the PCF response to these events, essentially the PCF analysis was sound.

First, the ruling class had not yet lost the ability to rule and, second, the necessary breadth of support for a socialist revolution had not yet developed, despite the frenetic activity and enthusiasm of the



students.⁷ Antipathy between ultra-leftist students and a strongly working-class, other critics suggested 'workerist', PCF was considerable and deliberately encouraged by the right.

The ebbing of the militancy of 1968 was inevitably a time of disillusionment and demoralisation for some. Yet by the mid-70s the French left was recovering, if unevenly. The re-established Socialist Party (PS) was building a sizeable electoral constituency. Allied in the Union of the Left, there was every possibility of achieving a PCF-PS breakthrough for the first time since 1945.

Yet, it was precisely then, in the period 1976-78, that a movement known as the 'New Philosophers' emerged. At a time when the French left was on the verge of electoral victory, the pages of *Le Monde*, *Nouvel Observateur* and other leading French newspapers and magazines were filled with articles, interviews and reviews by or about these 'New Philosophers', a group of former leftist and ultra-leftist intellectuals who had come to embrace the crudest anti-communism. At the moment when détente was accepted as the only realistic option, even by ruling circles in the West, the New Philosophers offered the simplistic equation, Marxism=Stalinism=the Gulag.

Familiar at least with Marxist terminology, if not the underlying concepts, this group became a battering ram of reaction. Maoist anti-Sovietism easily slid into conservative anti-Sovietism. Denunciation of the PCF as 'bureaucratic, conservative' and agents of the Soviet 'New Tsars', became the straightforward accusation that the PCF was simply a tool of the Kremlin intent on establishing a Gulag-type society in French colours.

French Maoism had an influential spontaneist strain, which was hostile to what it saw as the hierarchical character of traditional left politics as well as of capitalism itself. This wing had gathered around a semi-underground Parisian newspaper *'La Cause du Peuple'*, even for a time garnering Sartre's active support. Drawing on what it perceived to be the lessons of the Chinese 'Cultural Revolution', this wing of Maoism emphasised the 'spontaneity of the masses'. Like the Chinese Red Guards, it was suspicious of traditional structures of power within the left, seeing them as constantly generating the conditions for the domination of leaders over the led.

It was not too far for some to travel from a libertarian, semi-anarchist Maoism to outright individualism, resisting the tyranny of collectivist discipline and setting 'free thinking' against the restrictions of any systematic ideology or explanatory theory. Chinese foreign policy was increasingly oriented to building up an anti-Soviet front, opposing Soviet-backed national liberation movements, such as the MPLA in Angola, and supporting 'independent' regimes, such as the Shah of Iran. This added to the disintegration of the Maoist movement.

This individual soul-searching in the mid-70s also occurred against a changing international background. The period of US-Soviet détente was seeing major reversals for imperialism in the former Portuguese colonies in Africa, the overthrow of right-wing dictatorships in Portugal and Greece, and the defeat of US imperialism in Vietnam.

There was a determined and conscious effort by the US to take up 'human rights issues'. However, these 'human rights' were defined in the narrowest respects, relating only to political rights (and these to rights of expression rather than to participation or power), ignoring the basic human rights for health, housing, food, work and education. Nor, of course, were they applied to pro-Western states. A particular focus was on dissident intellectuals and writers of Eastern Europe, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Bukovsky, Sakharov and so on.

The effect in France was striking. The New Philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy called Solzhenitsyn the "Dante of our times", another writer gushed: "I do not hide it, I breathe better to know that he still exists." One of Solzhenitsyn's chief fans was Pierre Daix, a former PCF literary expert.⁸

Scarcely an opportunity was lost to mention the gulag. André Glucksmann, a former *'Cause du Peuple'* journalist, wrote a work entitled, 'The Cook and the Man-Eater: An essay on the State, Marxism and the Concentration Camps.' The 'cook' being a reference to Lenin's remark that every cook should learn how to run the state.

Levy wrote:

"The problem of our time ... is that of this strange cultural object, this political tradition, which the modern age has invented and baptised socialism. 'Why blame socialism?' Because, like all optimism, it lies when it promises, and terrorises when it happens; because starting from a radical critique of the 'reactionary idea of progress', I think we can see its most crass incarnation in socialism; finally because I fear that its recent 'Marxisation' makes it the ultimate thought of order, the most fearful police of minds that the West has produced. Stalin was not only Marxist, he was truly socialist. Solzhenitsyn does not only speak of the Gulag, but again of socialism. Here is an enigma it is useless to avoid."

Those who had once battled CRS anti-riot squads on the barricades of the Latin Quarter now went to go into action again, this time against the "fearful police of minds" – Marxism, the "ultimate thought of order". The latter is a revealing phrase. First, it equates Marxism with the most extreme forms of centralised political power. But Levy also means that Marxist theory is oppressive because it seeks to sort out, analyse and categorise various forms of social phenomena and historical facts and offer explanations for them. Marxism, as with any other systematic theory, seeks to bring intellectual order to these facts, to make generalisations about history and society, and therefore to advance our

"... It was not too far for some to travel from a libertarian, semi-anarchist Maoism to outright individualism, resisting the tyranny of collectivist discipline and setting 'free thinking' against the restrictions of any systematic ideology or explanatory theory."



knowledge and our capacity to change the world in which we live.

For the 'New Philosophers', this was Marxism's great danger. For the defeated, demoralised and disillusioned of 1968, who had sloganised about "Imagination to Power", socialism was based on the lies of 'optimism'.

The organised French left (more directly the PCF) was seen as the bearer of oppressive structures, since it rejected unco-ordinated individualism in favour of mass, collective intervention. The PCF was further attacked for its commitment to Marxism, since this counter-posed absolute freedom of thought in favour of a systematic 'grand' theory. The 'New Philosophers' took fragments of what had been at least a radical, if imperfect, rejection of oppression under capitalism and turned them full-square against all anti-capitalist forces. On the eve of French national elections, two New Philosophers wrote in *Le Monde*:

"Does it take the left being sure of being master of our minds and bodies tomorrow for it to consider that to defend people against the authorities is right-wing! ... The Gulag – not material certainly, not yet, but spiritual – is already here".

As the New Philosophers saw themselves, they were heroic dissidents imprisoned in a 'spiritual Gulag', bravely defying the authorities. Yet the real France was a state with capitalist authorities. The hysterical charges against the left's wish to be the master of 'our minds and bodies', and that the left's victory would result in a material Gulag bore no relation to French reality. It projected the more hysterical arguments of the right, which was in considerable disarray at the time, through the appropriated language of resistance.

The post-structuralist ideas of thinkers such as Michel Foucault were also added to this mix. Foucault had rejected Marxism's propositions that oppression was rooted in class structure and state power. Instead, he argued, power and oppression were much more diffuse and localised. Resistance, therefore, should not be focused or centralised since this could only displace oppression, rather than replace it. In a piece for *Le Monde* in May 1977, two other New Philosophers wrote:

"What is the PCF? A part of the State's apparatus, which may become the whole State apparatus. Whether the same 'class' domination is to continue through it, or whether it 'represents' another, is of little importance ... the PCF carries within itself the possibility of a more constraining State apparatus than any known up till now in France ... Marxism precisely allows the removal of the contradictions to which the bourgeois State is subject, since the State is not the owner of the means of production. These contradictions allow interstices which, however small, let the people breathe sometimes."

A straightforward and well-worn anti-communist thesis – 'The PCF wants to establish a dictatorship' – is wrapped up in vocabulary (the 'State apparatus', 'class domination' 'contradictions of the bourgeois State') borrowed from Althusser, with a

sprinkling of Foucault-style remarks on the 'interstices' of state power.

Levy likewise argued that:

"To the extent that a project of revolt touches on what is called power, the power it installs will lead back to the forms of mastery. That is, to the extent that revolutionaries project their dreams in the forms of this world, they will only ever produce imitations of revolution."

Since revolution only brings in new masters for old, what is the point of it? Furthermore, revolutionary programmes are simply drawn up in the heads of revolutionaries. So, they will inevitably fail, since 'understanding' the world is impossible. This echoes the Old School's arguments of three decades before.⁹ Their projects are simply dreams or illusions, which may become nightmares if they seek to impose them on others, who dream differently.

This is the basic feature of a number of related intellectual movements of the past 20 years, often collated under the umbrella term of 'post-modernism', which urge us to resign ourselves to the status quo and to abandon hope of understanding anything substantial about our world. If we are incapable of critically analysing society and identifying its ills, then the old maxim, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," comes into play.

Defending the Ancien Regime Yet the irony is that the individual freedoms that the 'New Philosophers' claimed to defend were achieved by the advances of the French Revolution of 1789, the subsequent revolutions of the 19th century, including the Paris Commune, and the liberation from Nazism in 1944-45, in which the Communists had played no small part.

This contemporary assault on Marxism is also an attack on the great ideas of the 18th century Enlightenment, the period of intellectual enquiry and challenges to the established social and economic order by the thinkers, many of them French, representing a confident, rising bourgeoisie. Marxism shares with the thinkers of the Enlightenment a belief in the human capacity to understand our world and to act rationally within it. In many ways, Marxism seeks to take forward the projects of the Enlightenment, summarised in the slogan of 1789, 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', but left incomplete and abandoned by the modern bourgeoisie which proved unequal to the task of ushering in an 'Age of Reason'.

For a 'New Philosopher' such as Levy, this must be turned on its head:

"Fascism did not come out of obscurity, but out of the light ... Reason is totalitarianism."

Not surprisingly, these movements of intellectual reaction could not leave the French Revolution, the most mature child of the Enlightenment, alone. In this field, the work of Francois Furet is significant, since his main historical work, 'Interpreting the French Revolution', and his last anti-communist



book, *The Passing of an Illusion*, provide a blanket rejection of all revolutionary change.

Furet himself was a former PCF member. French Marxists, most notably Albert Souboul and George Lefebvre, had already written path breaking histories of the French Revolution and are among the most substantial in the field of historical materialism. However, polemicising against Marxist approaches to historical interpretation had an importance beyond academia. For many decades, the PCF placed itself squarely within a framework set by references to the 1789 Revolution, as well as subsequent revolutionary upheavals such as the 1871 Paris Commune. With such a rich national revolutionary history, the PCF was able to defend itself as a party of the French people par excellence, undermining attempts to portray the PCF simply as an agency of Moscow. Second, the very vocabulary and symbolism of the revolution allowed the PCF to present its strategy at various times as the continuation and consummation of the political project began in 1789.¹⁰

For these reasons, a rewriting of widely held notions of the French Revolution is a necessary part of repudiating Marxism, this was Furet's aim. His main work begins with an essay entitled '*The French Revolution is Over*'. Almost as a backhanded compliment the connection between the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 is openly recognised:

*"Solzhenitsyn's work has become the basic historical reference for the Soviet experience, ineluctably locating the issue of the gulag at the very core of the revolutionary endeavour. Once that happened, the Russian example was bound to turn round, like a boomerang, to strike its French 'origin'."*¹¹

Furet's method is essentially idealist. He seeks to disprove that the French Revolution was the product of struggles between members of classes whose conscious awareness, however partial and incomplete, of their actual conditions and material interests led them to overthrow the ancien regime. Furet argues that power "had no objective existence at the social level, it was but a mental presentation of the social sphere that permeated and dominated the field of politics". In other words, the actual existence of the Bastille and various other forms of repression is unimportant, but the debates of the Jacobins, for example, or the speeches of a Danton or Robespierre are important for the way they shape how 'power' and 'revolution' are articulated and understood. It is an application of a "discourse", the prioritisation of language above other outside material factors. Or, as we might say in the era of Millbank, it is the 'politics of spin'.

For Furet 'class' is simply an "imaginary social cohesion". If the urban petty bourgeoisie or rural landowners seemed to act together as a class it is not because they actually shared common social or economic interests but because they shared ideas, they inhabited the same mental universe, created and shaped by selected words with particular

meanings. This literally is 'Imagination to Power'.

Here we have moved into familiar territory. For if revolutions are not the result of social conflict, a reaction to oppression, exploitation or injustice but simply a language-game, then they have no more claim to legitimacy than alternative 'discourses'. If this is so, how can we justify the enormous upheavals that revolutions entail? Revolutionaries may claim to speak on behalf of the oppressed and exploited but this is simply a false claim since revolutionary politics is merely a particular construction of language. Revolutions are, in the end, literally conspiracies, (the word after all comes from the Latin, meaning "to breathe together", ie the whispering of secrets among confidantes). It merely replaces one set of masters and their dominant 'discourse' with another. Whether that conspiracy/discourse is 'Jacobin', 'Communist', 'Jew', 'Freemason' depends as much on the definitions of those excluded from the discourse as those within it.

Predictably, this approach has now been applied to the Russian Revolution itself by Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii in their *Interpreting the Russian Revolution : The Language and Symbols of 1917*.¹²

The words of Edmund Burke set the tone of conservative anti-revolutionary sentiment 185 years before his words were echoed by later French philosophers and historians.

"It is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or of building it up again, without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes."

(Reflections on the Revolution in France) (1790)

This renewed anti-communism seeks to put Marxism beyond the pale of legitimate intellectual debate. It is part of a wider attempt to construct a politics and ideology of the 'natural centre', equidistant from the extremes of left and right. It flows from the idea that we are witnessing the end of history, the final triumph of liberal capitalist democracy as the universal model and the falling away of socialist aberrations.

At precisely the moment when the 'triumph' of imperialism in the Cold War has been shaken by global economic collapse and reversion to brutal ethnic conflicts, it is imperative to remove Marxism from the list of acceptable dinner-party conversations. It is preferable, in the most grotesque parody of 'political correctness', to view the class bias of communists and socialists as if it were on a par with genocide.¹³ As we shall see in the second part of this article, concern for historical accuracy has been quite bypassed in a gory search for bloodthirsty revolutionaries to blame for all the horrors of the 20th century. The fight to preserve the real history of the past century from such distortion is also a struggle to understand its lessons for the future. ★

Part two appears in the next issue of Communist Review




Notes

- 1 US anti-communism during the 1950s and 1960s spanned the crude anti-intellectual McCarthyism of the right to a range of former leftist writers, such as ex-Trotskyists James Burnham (*The Managerial Revolution*) Max Shachtman who were often enlisted, unwittingly or not, into Cold War Crusade. The CIA helped sponsor US journals such as *Encounter*, the social-democratic inclined *Dissent*, and the more right-wing *Commentary*, as the main purveyors of intellectual anti-communism in this period, leading to Woody Allen's remark that the latter two journals planned to merge under a new title, *Dysentery*.
- 2 'Look left, look right...' *The Observer*, Sunday August 8, 1999
- 3 'In the Tracks of Historical Materialism', p32, Verso, London, 1983
- 4 Interestingly, the English Marxist historian EP Thompson launched a stinging attack on Althusser's ideas in his 'Poverty of Theory', suggesting that the French thinker shared important common philosophical assumptions with Sir Karl Popper. Merlin 19778
- 5 Althusser in fact contributed an unsigned article to a Maoist student magazine in 1966 on the significance of the Cultural Revolution. 'Althusser and the End of Leninism?', p18, Margaret A Majumdar, Pluto, London 1995
- 6 Among Althusser's students in the 1966-68 period were New Philosophers Bernard-Henri Levy and the writers Jambet and Lardreau.
- 7 Ironically, Althusser himself offers one of the more down-to-earth evaluations of the 1968 events in a letter of 15 March 1969 which is included in Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, 'Letters from inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser', New Left Books, 1973.

- 8 These and the following quotes from the New Philosophers in the French press are from 1977 and are included in "The New Philosophers", Tim Jenkins, 'International', Vol4, No 2, p31-34, Winter 1977
 - 9 Popper's main work, 'The Open Society and its Enemies,' was first translated into French only in 1979.
 - 10 In his speech to a 150th anniversary rally in Paris, June 1939, PCF general secretary Maurice Thorez acknowledged the contribution of previous generations of French revolutionaries: "When we go forward, when we prepare for the next revolution, it is just as 'going toward the sea the river remains faithful to its source.'" Included in 'Ten Essays on the French Revolution', p43 Lawrence and Wishart, 1940
 - 11 François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, p12, Cambridge University Press, 1981
 - 12 I am not aware that this historical revisionism has been applied to that other great revolutionary upheaval which predated the French Revolution, namely the American Revolution against British colonialism. It is interesting to ask why the new conservatives should fail to denounce this great struggle motivated as it was by an ideology intimately linked with the Enlightenment.
 - 13 "Communism[s goal was] different from that of Nazism only in its invocation of 'class' instead of 'race' and in its distinctive euphemisms: Nazis applied 'special treatment' to the useless people they murdered, Communists 'liquidated' those whom history, in their eyes, had already condemned."
- Tony Judt's Black Book review, The Longest Road To Hell, *New York Times* December 22 1997.

communist review



social partnership
Seattle riots
Pinochet free?
Communists in
government?
argument and analysis
clarity and direction
action and theory

communist review exists to
encourage Marxist ideas and
debate. Take out an annual
subscription — three issues —
guaranteeing that each issue is
delivered to your door.



Please send me a subscription to communist review
I enclose £5 for three issues £10 for six issues

NAME

ADDRESS

POST CODE

e mail

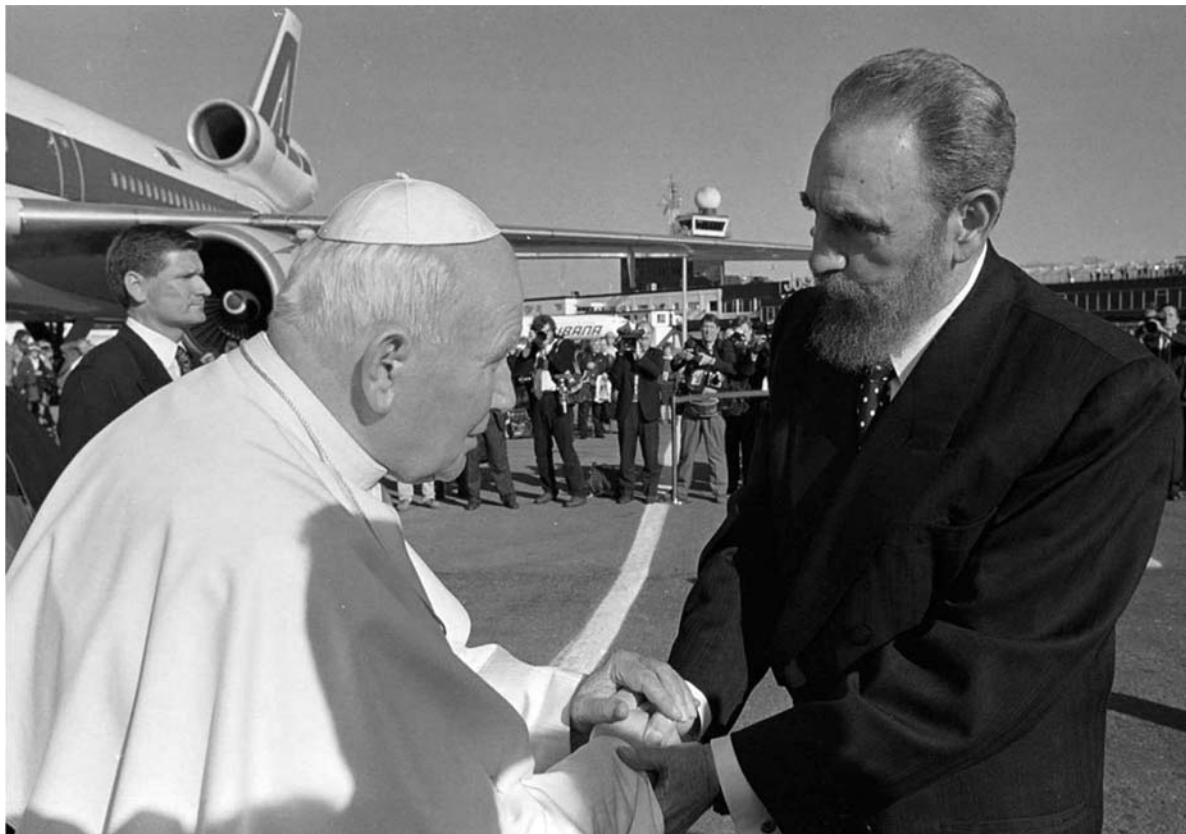
Return to Communist Review
Unit F11 Cape House 787 Commercial Road, London E14 7HG



Reopening the debate on marxism and religion

Geoff Bottoms

DISCUSSION



‘...Marx and Engels understood religious beliefs primarily as the cultural product of contradictory socio-economic circumstances rather than a set of philosophical arguments transcending history.’

FAR FROM attempting to square the circle or reconcile the irreconcilable developments both within Marxism and Christian Theology have opened up new avenues of dialogue in which those on opposite sides of the argument may seek common ground in creating a radically free and democratic society.

In re-opening the debate I will be arguing for a reappraisal of the classical Marxist texts in the light of liberation theology while highlighting religion as a crucial component of the culture of the oppressed which cannot be reduced in a crude and simple way to economic determinants. In this respect Sartre and Althusser acknowledged that the cultural sphere is an ideological battleground rather than the hostage of materialist processes.

It is also important to remember that Marx and Engels understood religious beliefs primarily as the cultural product of contradictory socio-economic circumstances rather than a set of philosophical arguments transcending history. As Cornel West points out in his article *Religion and Marxist politics*, “The classical Marxist critique to religion is not a priori philosophical rejection of religion; rather it is a social analysis of and historical judgement upon religious practices”.¹

From the outset it is essential to make the distinction between a belief in God which can neither be proved nor disproved scientifically and the relevance of such a belief to a world suffering under the weight of oppression, injustice, exploitation and greed. In the course of this discussion I shall attempt to draw parallels between the action of the divine for religious believers and the processes of historical materialism for Marxists which makes faith neither necessary nor redundant. While not wishing to exclude other world faiths from the equation I shall be drawing on the body of Social Teaching developed by the Roman Catholic Church.

As Marx once pointed out, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”² In arguing for a new relationship between Marxists and Religious Believers I wish to return to Marx and Engels’ original critique which concentrates on praxis rather than sterile theological debate in the belief that religion can be an agent of social change although in serious need of renewal.

At the time of Marx the institutional church was identified with the prevailing social order to which it gave the divine seal of approval. Rooted in a

feudal past and now ready to serve its new capitalist masters it would be so easy to see the religious masses as mere passive recipients of an ideology which on the one hand sought to soften the blow of the status quo while on the other offered a future beyond this world which would compensate for all its miseries and injustices. While there is some truth in this Marx and Engels went further and saw religion as first and foremost a profound human response to and protest against the intolerable conditions of the day. "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creating the feelings of a heartless world and the spirit of conditions that are unspiritual. It is the opium of the people."³

On this understanding religion is not an alienated form of cultural practice imposed from above but an impotent and inadequate cry from the heart which overlooks the socio-economic circumstances that condition its expression. Not only is religion alone incapable of providing the social and historical analysis necessary for change but it also impedes that process of transformation by seeking refuge in cosmic and ontological arguments while reducing morality to the level of the personal and more explicitly the sexual. In other words Marx and Engels do not simply claim that a scientific view of society and history provides an alternative to religion as a means of human liberation but that a Marxist analysis of the situation can provide useful methodological pointers to action motivated in part by religious belief. This has been the position of the proponents of Liberation Theology.

Of course the idea of a communist society based on peace, co-operation, community and common wealth did not begin with Marx let alone the Russian Revolution of 1917. Primitive communism has existed in various forms and the church is no exception. In the New Testament we read of the earliest Christian community, "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need".⁴ The familiar phrase of Marx, "From each according to his ability to each according to his need", springs to mind! In fact later on we are told that a couple, Ananias and Sapphira, were struck down by God for withholding part of the proceeds from the sale of their property! Then there have been the religious orders sharing a common life although hierarchically structured, the Levellers and the Diggers of the seventeenth-century, communities such as the Bruderhof in the UK and the US who regard themselves as "spiritual communists" while pursuing a radical agenda of social change, and the base communities in Latin America responding to the challenges of Liberation Theology. In addition an ecumenical community flourishes at Taize in France attracting the world's youth while Israel continues to pioneer the Kibbutz movement despite the dilution of its original principles. The list is endless. Meanwhile

individuals have articulated the aspirations of the masses and mobilised them for struggle from the revolutionary priest, John Ball, during the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 to Archbishop Oscar Romero who was gunned down at the altar in 1980 for speaking out on behalf of the poor and the oppressed in El Salvador.

The South African Communist Party has been quick to approach the social reality of religious belief with an historical, class and dialectical understanding rather than dismiss it as a rival system to be defeated at all costs. In its latest programme adopted at the Tenth Congress in July 1998 we read, "Our class approach to reality (a bias towards the poor), our struggle for a society based on social need and not on private profit, our condemnation of selfishness, and personal greed, and our refusal to give way to demoralisation (in other words our espousal of hope) are closer to the core values of all the world's major religions than the ethos of globalisation, imperialism and the Johannesburg Stock Market. Dogmatic errors from the side of Marxists, and the class abuse of institutionalised religion by many reactionary forces, have historically contributed to a dichotomy between socialists and believers that should never have happened".⁵

If Marxism and Religion have shared values and mutual historical goals then it follows that they could have much to gain from one another. Certainly those within the Church who claim an allegiance to both would agree with the French Catholic philosopher and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who wrote, "The synthesis of the Christian God Above and the Marxist God Ahead is the only God whom we can henceforth adore in spirit and in truth".⁶ The problem lies in their apparent contradictory understanding of the nature of reality resulting in a conflict between materialism and idealism. Whereas believers would argue for a divine being as the driving force of history Marxists would look to the scientific laws of social development. In the light of contemporary theology the gap between these two positions may not be as impossible as it was first thought. After all, people with faith have little problem with the idea of evolution unless they are fundamentalists. It all depends on whether God is viewed as above and beyond his creation or active and involved at the heart of the process. Science has unlocked so much of the former mystery that a "Deus ex machina" – or God of the Gaps – can no longer be considered a viable model without removing the need for him altogether. On the other hand a truly "materialistic" God has distinct possibilities.

This is not the place to theologise yet it might be useful to pursue one line of enquiry which illustrates the point. In his book, *Love's Endeavour; Love's Expense*, Canon Vanstone likens God to an artist whose work has almost its own power of response and therefore something of a freedom of its own to "come right" or to "come wrong": "It may



be said of the artist that he is always stretching his powers beyond their known limit...as the artist exceeds his known powers, his work is precariously poised between success and failure, between triumph and tragedy...We see, at the moment of lost control, the most intense endeavour of the artist: and his greatness lies in his ability to discover ever-new reserves of power to meet each challenge of precarious adventure.”⁷ This makes for a vulnerable God who waits in love on the response of his creation rather than an omnipotent God who over-rides his own self-imposed mechanical laws on the universe. It is not that he wills the moment of lost control or intends it to serve a higher purpose as some believers would argue. Instead his will is to overcome the problem of creativity in every particular form and moment in which it will arise.

John Polkinghorne, a former Cambridge Professor of Mathematical Physics and now an Anglican priest, argues much the same position but from a scientific point of view. In his book, *Science and Providence*, he shows how quantum theory has revealed a much more flexible and unpredictable universe than the one Newton envisaged. Addressing the question of suffering and evil in the world which causes insuperable difficulties for faith he writes, “People say that they cannot at all believe in a God who acts if he did not do so to stop the Holocaust. If God were a God who simply interferes at will with his creation, the charge against him would be unanswerable. But if his action is self-limited by a consistent respect for the freedom of his creation (so that he works only within the actual openness of its process) and also by his own utter reliability (so that he excludes the shortcuts of magic) it is not clear that he is to be blamed for not overruling the wickedness of humankind.”⁸

None of this exhausts the argument but it does move us away from the sterile debates of the past and points to common areas of understanding for the future. On this understanding Marxists can respect religious believers for their scientific integrity while those with faith can begin to appreciate the dynamics of Marxism in explaining the processes of history and the development of society. To return to praxis let us examine the Social Teaching of the Roman Catholic Church by way of parallel.

In 1891 Pope Leo XIII issued the great social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* which ran counter to the prevailing principles of economic and political liberalism in that it stressed the dignity of the worker as a human being rather than as a cog in the money-making machine.

It proclaimed, “Employers must never forget that both divine and human law forbid them to squeeze the poor and wretched for the sake of gain or to profit from the helplessness of others. To defraud a man of the wage which is his due is to commit a grievously sinful act which cries out to heaven for vengeance.”⁹

Pius XI followed this up in 1931 with his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* which condemned capital's use of labour in having “no regard to the human dignity of the workers” and stated that free competition could not be “an adequate controlling principle in economic affairs”. At the same time it espoused nobler principles of “social justice” and “social charity”.¹⁰

The real break-through came in 1965 when the Second Vatican Council declared in the document *Gaudium et Spes* that there were two great challenges facing the Church – Peace and Social Justice – and put human rights at the centre of the Church's concerns. It attacked economic and social disparity, nationally and globally, and began an analysis of the world economic situation that allowed or caused starvation and under-development.

Two years later Pope Paul VI raised the spectre of violent struggle as a result of colonialism and poverty in his encyclical letter *Populorum Progressio* and put the onus on rich nations to improve the lot of the poor. He wrote, “It is unfortunate that on these new conditions of society a system has been constructed which considers profit as the key motive for economic progress, competition as the supreme law of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right that has no limits and carries no corresponding obligation.”¹¹

Meanwhile liberation theology originating in Latin America was beginning to reverberate in the higher reaches of the Church with the bishops of the world producing a document “Justice in the World” in 1971. It stated that “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”¹²

This theme was taken up by Pope John Paul II in 1987 when he published his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* which addressed issues of unemployment, homelessness, international debt and ecology. In the most uncompromising language yet he pronounced, “Anyone wishing to renounce the difficult yet noble task of improving the lot of man in his totality, and of all people, with the excuse that the struggle is difficult and that constant effort is required, or simply because of the experience of defeat and the need to begin again, that person would be betraying the will of God the Creator.”¹³

The latest word on the subject comes from the same Pope in the document *Tertio Millenio Adveniente*. Issued in 1994 in preparation for the new millennium he argues, “If we recall that Jesus came to ‘preach the good news to the poor’ (*Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22*) how can we fail to lay greater emphasis on the Church's preferential option for the poor and the outcast? Indeed it has to be said that a commitment to justice and peace in a



world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of Jubilee.”¹⁴

None of these quotes is exhaustive nor can it be claimed that they support the Marxist point of view. In fact many of the documents contain a vigorous criticism of Marxism and seek a “Third Way” in resolving the problems that they address. Yet they demonstrate how far the Catholic Church has come in recognising the need for religious believers to become politically involved if their faith is to have any practical meaning or relevant application. Much of the Church’s Social Teaching runs parallel with Marxism as a guide to action and shares many of its aspirations. The tragedy is that for most Catholics it is the Church’s best-kept secret! But not if you are a follower of Liberation Theology to which we must now turn.

This movement began in Latin America primarily in response to the consolidation of the capitalist social process which involved brutal state repression and a burgeoning urbanisation. The result was a rapid yet painful industrial class formation ripe for political struggle. In identifying poverty as the product of the economic organisation of society which exploits some – the workers – and excludes others – the underemployed, unemployed, and the marginalised – liberation theologians came to the conclusion that the only way out of the situation was revolution, understood as the transformation of the bases of the economic and social system, in which the poor stood up as subjects.

This dialectical understanding led them to borrow from Marxism certain “methodological pointers” that proved useful in understanding the world of the oppressed such as the importance of economic factors, attention to the class struggle, and the mystifying power of ideologies, including religious ones. While maintaining a decidedly critical stance in relation to Marxism Liberation Theology makes use of its analysis without embracing its materialist or atheistic philosophy. In short Marx may be the companion along the way but Christ remains the guide!

Not that this “theology in movement” remains the preserve of the experts or the academic elite. Direct knowledge of the reality of oppression and its liberation involves engagement in solidarity with the poor. Far from being a “top-down” process any meaningful struggle for social justice has to begin at the grassroots which is why over 200,000 base Christian communities exist in Latin America as concrete praxis-centres for social change, communal support and individual nurture. Their inspiration is taken from the scriptures in which God exercises a preferential option for the poor and is present in the struggles of the oppressed. Nowhere is this more clearly defined than in Mary’s Song of Liberation “The Magnificat” which boldly proclaims, “He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has

filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away”.¹⁵ Therefore it is the task of Liberation Theology to recover the practical dimension of biblical faith.

Of course, liberation must address other levels of social oppression such as discrimination against blacks, indigenous peoples or other minority groups, and women. As Leonardo and Clodovis Boff point out in their book *Introducing Liberation Theology* the socio-economically poor are the infrastructural expression of the process of oppression while the other groups represent super-structural expressions of oppression which in turn are conditioned by the infrastructural. For example, it is one thing to be a black taxi driver, quite another to be a black football idol; it is one thing to be a women working as a domestic servant, quite another to be the first lady of the land; it is one thing to be an Amerindian thrown off your land, quite another to be an Amerindian owning your own farm. “We are dealing here with nonantagonistic contradictions mixed in with the basic, antagonistic class conflict in our societies. But it must also be noted that noneconomic types of oppression aggravate pre-existing socio-economic oppression. The poor are additionally oppressed when beside being poor, they are also black, indigenous, women or old.”¹⁶ Marxists would want to add that all these other forms of oppression are a function of capitalist class exploitation which divides the working class and increases its exploitation.

First world theologians have also woken up to the confrontation between Christian faith and the contradictions inherent in so-called advanced societies. In the USA a black liberation theology has developed deeply committed to civil rights campaigns while a European theology of liberation has evolved concerned with the responsibilities of the developed world towards those of the developing and underdeveloped countries of the South. As well as addressing the needs of the “new poor” back home such as young drug addicts, single parents, asylum seekers and the elderly there is also a growing engagement with ecological and nuclear concerns plus of course a vibrant feminist liberation theology which makes the link between sexual and economic oppression.

Liberation Theology has a spirituality at its roots and a dream of a society of freed men and women. Without this dream it believes that people will not mobilise themselves to transform society, nor will society seek to renew its foundations. The characteristics needed are comradeship, vision, commitment, a desire to be free, joy, the ability to reflect, and a utopian hope. “Those committed to integral liberation will keep in their hearts the little utopia of at least one meal for everyone every day, the great utopia of a society free from exploitation and organised around the participation of all, and finally the absolute utopia of communion with God in a totally redeemed creation.”¹⁷

In the light of such developments the time has come to move the debate beyond the premise of



religion as a mere opiate and to be open to its possibilities as an agent in promoting social and individual liberation. For too long Marxists have viewed oppressed people as solely political or economic agents without regard for their capacity to create cultural products of value and oppositional groups of value. This means that religion has tended not to be taken seriously as a crucial element of the culture of the oppressed. Yet if Marxists are to inject fresh life into the smouldering embers of Left theory and praxis then the actual products and practices of those struggling under conflictual and contradictory socio-economic conditions not of their choosing needs to be recognised and acknowledged. It may be that “new personal meanings, social adjustments and political struggles for human freedom and democracy” will emerge after “traversing, transforming, and building upon such crucial spheres in society”¹⁸ but for the moment the priority is to engage.

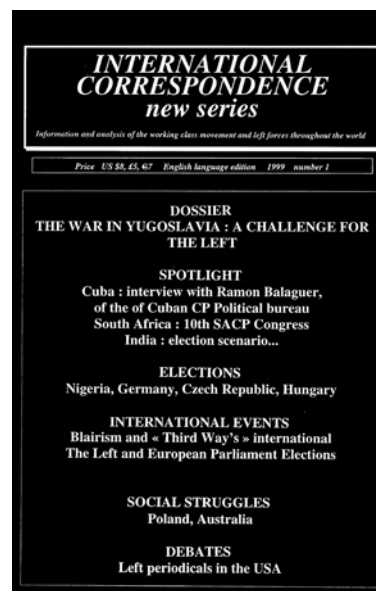
President Fidel Castro of Cuba summed it up well in his conversations with Frei Betto when he said, “From a strictly political point of view I believe that it is possible for Christians to be Marxists as well and to work together with Marxist communists to transform the world. The important thing is that in both cases they be honest revolutionaries who want to end the exploitation of man by man and to struggle for a fair distribution of social wealth, equality, fraternity, and the dignity of all human beings – that is, that they be the standard-bearers of the most advanced political, economic, and social ideas, even though in the case of the Christians their starting point is a religious concept.”¹⁹ Let the debate begin and the struggle continue! ★

Notes

- 1 Religion and Marxist Politics – Cornel West (Frontier Jan.10-16, 1999)
- 2 Theses on Feuerbach (1888) - Karl Marx
- 3 Preface to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1844) – Karl Marx
- 4 Acts of the Apostles Chapter 4 verse 32
- 5 Our Marxism 6.4 SACP Programme 10th Congress July 1 – 5 1998.
- 6 Letter of June 1952 – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
- 7 Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense (Chapter 4) – W.H. Vanstone
- 8 Science and Providence (Chapter 4) – John Polkinghorne
- 9 Encyclical Letter Rerum Novarum 1891 – Pope Leo XIII
- 10 Encyclical Letter Quadragesimo Anno 1931 – Pope Pius XI
- 11 Encyclical Letter Populorum Progressio 1967 – Pope Paul VI
- 12 Justice in the World 1971 – The Third Synod of Bishops in Rome
- 13 Encyclical Letter Sollicitudo Rei Socialis 1987 – Pope John Paul II
- 14 Encyclical Letter Tertio Millenio Adveniente 1994 – Pope John Paul II
- 15 St. Luke's Gospel Chapter 2 verses 52 – 53
- 16 Introducing Liberation Theology 1987 – Leonardo & Clodovis Boff
- 17 Ditto
- 18 Religion and Marxist Politics – Cornel West (Frontier Jan 10 – 16 1999)
- 19 Fidel and Religion – Conversations with Frei Betto 1990 – Ocean Press

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE

The appearance of an English-language version of **International Correspondence** is a significant boost to those on the British left frustrated by the lack of information and analyses available on communist and left parties worldwide. Established in France in the early 1990s, **International Correspondence** was the collective effort of a group of activists with wide-ranging and in-depth knowledge of international and regional issues who were able to put out 22 successive issues in French. Now that an English-language version is available, it promises “Information and analysis of the working class movement and left forces throughout the world”. Priced at £5, its 48 pages cover a whole range of issues from a dossier on how the left reacted to the NATO war against Yugoslavia, an interview with a Cuban CP leader, the Cyprus question, the direction of the Socialist International, and many other issues. The continuing importance of mass-based communist parties in countries such as Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and India, to name but four, is particularly interesting and is discussed in some depth. The Communist Party will be discussing issues of distribution with a representative of **International Correspondence** in the near future and we will keep Communist Review readers informed.



Those interested in this first issue can contact the Communist Party office (please note our new address) or **International Correspondence** directly at BP 95, 92153 Suresnes Cedex France. Subscriptions are £20 for four issues.



The west European left at the turn of the millennium

Kate Hudson

AS THE tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall has passed, with the expected trumpeting about democracy and freedom, it has nevertheless been impossible for the media coverage to avoid the real issue of the social and economic disaster that the introduction of capitalism has brought to the countries of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. As a recent World Bank Report has stated, in 1989, 14 million people in the Soviet bloc were living in poverty – by the mid-1990s the figure was about 147 million. The former relatively egalitarian income distribution and high social wage have been broken down and replaced with extremes of wealth and poverty and the rapid destruction of welfare systems has led to high levels of unemployment, homelessness, increases in disease and reduction of life expectancy.

The expectations of 1989 – that the countries of eastern Europe would rapidly catch up with those of western Europe when freed from the communist yoke – have proved to be baseless.

So too, however, has another of the common assumptions of 1989 – that communism was dead. Whilst the overwhelming majority of communist governments were removed, and the international communist movement as we knew it was dealt a shattering blow, there can now be no doubt that announcements of communism's death were premature. Not only is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation the largest party in the Russian Duma, but also across western Europe during the 1990s, communist and former communist parties have had an increasing political significance, many playing a role in national and regional governmental politics. Many of these communist and former communist parties have developed to the extent that they are now organised on a regional basis, both as the New European Left Forum, and as the United European Left-Nordic Green Left Group, a significant bloc in the European Parliament, and can be seen as a distinctive political current.

This article will look at the reasons for the consolidation and reemergence of communist and former communist parties as a force to be reckoned

with in west European politics, and will argue that this political current has gone through three primary stages of development, each of which has clarified the programmatic and policy base of the parties involved.

Phase I The first stage was the result of the events of 1989, which deepened the crisis in which many of the western European communist parties found themselves during the 1980s, and most of those parties which had not already done so, split. On the one hand, the Eurocommunist currents concluded that the entire enterprise of building communist, as distinct from social democratic, parties had been a mistake, and Eurocommunism either joined social democracy or vanished from the political landscape. On the other hand, the parties' left wings started a process of rethinking their entire political strategy, but from a standpoint which remained firmly anchored on the left of, and in competition with, European social democracy. This process led to the building or consolidating of independent left wing parties or alliances – the United Left in Spain, the Party of Communist Refoundation in Italy, the French Communist Party, the Party of Democratic Socialism in Germany and so on. There were two defining characteristics in this stage: firstly, that to a great extent, previous divisions within the labour movement were overcome, and political unity was achieved amongst those forces that opposed the restoration of capitalism in eastern Europe and maintained an anti-capitalist position. The main components within this process were left communists as distinct from Eurocommunists, left social democrats and some parts of the fourth international. This process of left realignment was evident in or around all the above-mentioned parties and organisations.

Secondly, that whilst these forces maintained anti-capitalist positions, there was some clarification and reorientation of their politics. For example, these parties now largely defined themselves as democratic socialist, distinguishing themselves from the practice of the former ruling parties, and also now significantly embraced white



collar workers, feminism, the politics of black liberation, ecology, and the politics of sexuality.

A new openness to a range of different left ideas thus emerged out of the debris of 1989 – with the new European left parties and alliances incorporating significant parts of the new left which had emerged outside the communist movement after 1968 – particularly in Italy and Spain. The first major manifestation of this left realignment which was to forge the new European left had occurred in Spain in the 1980s. The Communist Party of Spain (PCE) had been legalized in 1977, following the end of the Franco dictatorship, but had swung to the right in the late 1970s, espousing Eurocommunism. The social democratic Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) under Gonzalez – receiving funding from the German SPD and the Socialist International during the seventies – was able to position itself as the more radical force. The PSOE won around three times as many votes as the PCE in general elections in 1977 and 1979, polling 30.4 per cent in 1979 as opposed to 10.7 per cent for the PCE. The disintegration of the right led to a PSOE victory in the 1982 elections. The PSOE won 48.4 per cent of the vote, gaining an absolute majority in parliament. With the PCE winning only four per cent of the vote, the PSOE no longer ran the risk of being out-flanked on its left and became one of the first socialist parties to embrace neo-liberalism, prioritizing a reduction in inflation which was paid for by a rise in unemployment from seventeen per cent in 1982 to 22 per cent in 1986.

This early shift to the right of the Spanish socialists in government created the political space for a left to emerge which would oppose the PSOE's anti-working class policies. Shortly before the 1986 general election the PCE put together a coalition called the United Left (IU), intended to fill just this space. However, the IU was not merely the result of an attempt to consolidate electoral forces. It was born out of a mass campaign during the first PSOE government on NATO membership. Before entering government, the PSOE had opposed NATO membership and had promised a referendum on membership, changing its position when in government. A broad committee, including communists, pacifists, feminists, human rights groups, Christians and the far left coordinated a vigorous campaign, which in spite of massive media saturation and huge political pressure for a 'yes' vote, actually won 43 per cent of the vote against NATO. It was this campaign which provided the basis for the founding of the IU in 1986, and although it made little advance on the PCE's result of 1982, it remained the foundation for the IU's relaunch in February 1989 and a more than doubling of its votes in the general election of October 1989 with 9.1 per cent. This support had increased, by the general elections of 1996 to 10.5 per cent.

The IU was the forerunner of the new European left, its early development the result of the

particular conditions in Spain following the demise of the dictatorship, and the early collapse of the PCE, as a result of the Eurocommunist policies of the late 1970s. The next wave in this trend emerged more directly as a result of the collapse of communism.

By 1989, the Italian Communist Party had moved through its Eurocommunist phase, exemplified by the 'Historic Compromise', and had effectively already become a social democratic party before 1989. In November 1989, Occhetto attempted to bring the form of the party in line with this reality and proposed that the PCI be dissolved and that a new 'constituent phase' be entered, which would lead to the foundation of a new party, which would be redefined as socialist, popular, democratic and progressive and committed to full membership of the Socialist International.

The 'constituent phase' was entered at the PCI's Special Nineteenth Congress in March 1990, and at the Twentieth Congress in January 1991 the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS) was launched with the support of the majority of delegates. This was accompanied, however, by the setting up of the Movement for the Refoundation of Communism (MRC), a grouping committed to the refounding of a communist party which attracted those from within the PCI who had opposed the move to social democracy. Adopting the name Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC) during 1991, PRC was also joined by Democrazia Proletaria (DP), a parliamentary party originating in the Italian new left of the late sixties and early seventies, adding several thousand mainly young activists and working class militants to the new party. By the end of 1991, PRC had a total membership in the region of 150,000. In the general elections of 1992, PRC polled 5.6 per cent, rising to six per cent in 1994 and 8.6 per cent in 1996. Between them, PRC and the PDS in 1996 reached around the 30 per cent mark that the PCI had last achieved in the late 1970s.

The German Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) was formed at an emergency Congress in December 1989, as the direct organizational successor to the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) of the German Democratic Republic. In the elections of March 1990, the PDS came third behind the CDU and Social Democrats (SPD), with 16.4% of the vote, demonstrating that it had maintained a solid base of support. In the local elections of 6 May 1990 in the east German Lander, the PDS won more than 10,000 seats in regional, city and local assemblies.

The Congress of December 1989 adopted the definition of the SED-PDS as 'a modern socialist party in the tradition of the German and international labour movement. It proclaims itself to be part of the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin and of the democratic, communist, social democratic, socialist and pacifist movement.'

Summing up the difference between the PDS and German social democracy, PDS leader Gregor Gysi observed that 'the SPD stood for democratic



capitalism, while the PDS stood for democratic socialism'. Polling 2.4 per cent in the Bundestag elections for the former GDR in 1990, the PDS has steadily increased to 4.4 per cent throughout Germany in 1994 and 5.1 per cent in 1998. The PDS polls up to 20 per cent or more in parts of the new eastern lander, and from 1998 had two ministers in the state government of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and from June 1999, six MEPs. In the Lander elections of autumn 1999, the PDS preformed beter than ever, in some parts of eastern Germany pushing the SPD into third place.

The French Communist Party (PCF) demonstrates a quite different route to a rather similar political perspective. Having passed through a Eurocommunist phase in the 1970s and by the 1980s returned to a pro-Moscow orientation, a defining moment for the PCF was the point at which it broke with the Soviet leadership. Whilst the PCF had supported Gorbachev's early initiatives, by the late 1980s it was distancing itself from the direction of the reforms and identifying more closely with the Portuguese and Cuban communist parties. The clear break came over the Gulf War in 1990, as it did for many parties, and helped to set the future direction of the PCF. Gorbachev supported the US operation in the Gulf, whereas the PCF was not prepared to back US imperialism. In its opposition to the war, the PCF worked in a committee – Appel des 75 – with a range of left forces, including trotskysts, ecologists and anarchists. This step was to indicate a new orientation of the PCF towards other left groups which, far from being a grasping at straws during a period of crisis, has been consolidated within the more open political practice and debate of the PCF during the 1990s. The Gulf War was a defining moment for the left because it forced parties to take a pro or anti-imperialist position. It certainly clarified the ultimate logic of Gorbachev's trajectory and served as a factor in the realignment of the international left. Throughout the 1990s, the PCF consolidated its position, eventually entering a left coalition government in 1997, having been pivotal in securing the electoral success of the left.

Phase 2 The political context in which these new left parties were developing was one of a resurgent capitalism. No longer potentially threatened by communism from the east, European employers felt they had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take on the domestic forces resistant to what they saw as the indispensable rationalization and integration of the west European economy. The result was very rapid progress towards the conclusion of the Treaty of Maastricht in December 1991. This set out a strictly monetarist framework for economic and monetary union. It established strict limits on the levels of total public debt (60 per cent of GDP) and government budget deficits (3 per cent of GDP) – whose achievement would require major public spending cuts in most EU states. It also provided for the insulation of key areas of

economic policy from democratic accountability, by giving the projected independent European Central Bank control of monetary policy, within a framework which specified that price stability took precedence over such things as economic growth, employment and living standards. The Maastricht framework outlawed not merely socialist incursions upon the free market (that had already been done by the Treaty of Rome) but the Keynesian economic policies which had previously been the leitmotif of west European social democracy.

As a result, West European politics in the 1990s was to be dominated by the struggle for and against the consequences of the implementation of the Treaty of Maastricht, and it was in this context that the second phase in the re-emergence of the left was consolidated. The first stages of the struggle against the Treaty were not encouraging because the Maastricht provisions were made more onerous by the shift in the balance of power within the EU resulting from unification. As the strongest economy in Europe, Germany was the chief contributor to the European Union budget. Its trade surplus effectively subsidized the rest of the Community, while its industry benefited from the relative exchange rate stability provided by the European monetary system. With unification, this balance changed dramatically. Indeed, the Maastricht Treaty provisions were set so rigidly because Germany had no intention of subsidizing the weaker EU economies.

The first crisis came rapidly as the European Monetary System collapsed in August 1993, essentially because, in the context of recession, the rest of the EU simply could not tolerate the levels of interest rate set by the German Bundesbank in order to attract the funds necessary to soften the impact of unification upon east Germany. The deadline for the start of monetary union was put back from 1997 to 1999. In order to meet it, virtually every EU government had already embarked upon a programme of public spending cuts and labour market deregulation in a context where EU unemployment averaged more than 10 per cent.

In June 1992, the Italian Socialist Party Prime Minister, Amato, launched an austerity programme, reducing spending on health care and pensions, cutting local spending and controlling public sector pay. A similar programme in the Netherlands cut subsidies to education, housing and public transport. In Spain, with the highest levels of unemployment in the EU, the Socialist government of Felipe Gonzalez introduced a plan to cut unemployment benefits. Under the French Socialist government at the beginning of the 1990s, the franc fort policy – linking the French and German currencies at an exchange rate at which France could not compete – ensured that unemployment never fell below 10 per cent, and the government destroyed its support through trying to reduce the resulting deficit through public spending cuts. Similar policies were introduced throughout the EC. Public opposition to these



policies mounted rapidly, in the context of the highest levels of unemployment in the advanced industrial world.

The social and political results were dramatic, and as the Maastricht deadline approached, and governments launched more and more desperate efforts to carry out spending cuts, trade unions launched the biggest waves of struggles seen in western Europe since the period following May 1968. Germany saw a series of major strikes starting with the public sector strike which paralyzed the country in May 1992. In Italy, on 12 November 1994 one and a half million people demonstrated in Rome against the government's plans to cut welfare benefits and state pensions – a third of the marchers were pensioners. Most spectacularly of all, in November 1995, the French trade unions launched what developed into a wave of strikes and demonstrations, lasting for more than three weeks, against the conservative government cuts.

The reaction to the consequences of Maastricht was equally clear on the political field, and a pattern emerged. The mainstream Conservative Parties suffered massive splits in their social base. Italian Christian Democracy was virtually destroyed – dramatically losing support to the former fascist National Alliance in the south and the right wing separatist Northern League in the north. The French right lost a significant part of its electorate to the National Front whose vote rose to 15 per cent, becoming the largest party among small shop-keepers and the unemployed. Following a dramatic breakthrough for the fascist Republican Party in the 1991 European elections in Bavaria, the governing Christian Social Union made a sharp shift to anti-immigrant rhetoric. In Belgium, the extreme right wing nationalist Vlaams Blok won 11 parliamentary seats in 1991 and became the biggest party in Antwerp.

On the left, wherever they were in government, the Eurosocijalist parties generally suffered reverses ranging from serious to catastrophic. In the 1993 French election, Mitterrand's Socialist Party saw its vote fall to just 16 per cent having dominated the previous parliament. In the 1994, Italian general election, the Socialist Party was annihilated. In the 1993 general election in Spain the Spanish socialists lost their parliamentary majority and went on to be ejected from office in 1996. In the 1995 general election in Belgium the Socialist Party lost a third of its seats.

It was in this political context that the parties which had emerged out of the crisis of communism, to the left of social democracy, arrested their decline and began to advance, largely through their opposition to the austerity programmes, initiated in order to conform to the Maastricht criteria. The Italian Party of Communist Refoundation increased its vote from 5.6 per cent in 1992, to six per cent in 1994, to 8.6 per cent in 1996. The German PDS increased from 2.4 per cent in 1990, to 4.4 per cent in 1994, to 5.1 per cent in 1998 on an all Germany basis, and over 20 per cent in

parts of the former GDR. The United Left of Spain increased from 4.7 per cent in 1986, to 9.6 per cent in 1989, to 9.9 per cent in 1993, to 10.5 per cent in 1996.

Furthermore, the anti-Maastricht struggle began to further radicalize the Scandinavian left parties, bringing them into a shared political framework with the parties mentioned above, constituting the second phase of the emerging left realignment. The forces to the left of social democracy in Scandinavia originated in orthodox communist parties, but began their transition to recognizable new left positions as long ago as thirty years before the collapse of communism in 1989, beginning with Aksel Larsen's split from the Danish Communist Party in 1959. Although there were numerous national specificities to these parties, by the mid-1960s a Scandinavian alternative to both social democracy and orthodox communism was being developed. The Danish Socialist People's Party was formed from a majority split from the Danish Communist Party in 1959. It was followed in 1960 by the formation of the Norwegian Socialist People's Party, which was a split from the Norwegian Labour Party. In 1975 the Norwegian SPP was renamed the Socialist Left Party. Both the Danish SPP and the Norwegian SLP rapidly replaced the communist parties as the main political parties to the left of social democracy. They are both green socialist parties, committed to feminism, anti-racism and social justice, and emphasize both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activity. Whilst Norway remains outside the EU, the Norwegian Socialist Left Party maintains close relations with the European organizations which link the Scandinavian left parties with other European new left forces. In Sweden, the Communist Party modernized itself during the 1960s, drawing closer to feminism and environmentalism in the 1970s and remained the main left party, renaming itself Left Party Communists in 1967 and Left Party in 1990. According to party vice-chair, Johan Lonnroth, the Left Party is 'a party standing on four legs – socialist, internationalist, green and feminist.' Its programme, adopted in 1996 states that: 'The Left Party strives for the abolition of capitalism. We fight against the division of society into ruling upper classes and oppressed lower classes.' It also states its commitment to combating racism. The Left Party is also opposed to Swedish membership of NATO and NATO expansion and whilst participating in the European parliament, the Left Party is against Swedish membership of the European Union and works for its withdrawal and argues for a referendum on EMU membership. In its 1998 general election platform, it highlighted its opposition to privatization, its commitment to full employment, a 35-hour week with no reduction of wages, increased public sector investment and environmental protection. It also made a clear argument for strengthening the Left Party electorally, to help it move politics towards the left,



and 'to fight right-wing politics whether carried on by the Conservatives or the Social Democrats'.

The Left Party succeeded in its aim, for in the elections of September 1998, support for the Social Democratic party fell from 45.3 per cent to 36.6 per cent, forcing it to look to the Left and Green parties for support for a minority government. The dilemma which faced Italy's Party of Communist Refoundation in the autumn of 1998 – whether to support the centre-left government's spending cuts or risk seeing it ousted by the right – may well come to face the Swedish Left Party in the months and years ahead. Swedish social democracy has moved considerably to the right, even undergoing what Johan Lonnroth describes as 'Blairification', so the issue will be whether the Left Party can push the government to the left, or whether the Left Party will itself end up following the social democrats to the right.

The Finnish Left Alliance was founded in 1990, as the successor to the Finnish People's Democratic League, which was formed as an electoral front for the Finnish Communist Party. It is Finland's fourth largest party, with 14,000 members, over 300,000 voters, nineteen MPs out of 200 in the Finnish parliament, two members of the European parliament, over 1130 municipal councillors, many leading trade unionists, and since 1995 has two ministers in the Lipponen coalition government. The Left Alliance describes itself as representing: 'the so-called Third left, which tries to combine labour movement traditions with the ideas of postindustrial democratic movements. Ideologically the party is a pluralist one: it gathers left wing humanists, socialists, Marxists, feminists and ecologists – and simply leftwinger people.' The basic goal of the party is described as a socially and economically just and environmentally sustainable society, and whilst LA does not define itself as a traditional socialist party, its aim is to limit 'societal power based on capital ownership'. The LA formed the Nordic Green Left group in the European parliament with the Swedish Left Party and the Danish Socialist People's Party which cooperates with the United European Left group. In 1991, LA was one of the initiators of the New European Left Forum.

As the political transformation of these parties from orthodox communism towards more radical left and social movement politics – particularly feminism and environmentalism – had generally begun some decades before equivalent changes in their sister parties in western Europe, the Scandinavian left was less affected by the collapse of communism in 1989 than those parties still primarily identifying as communist with strong links with the CPSU. The catalyst which brought these parties back into a more militant anti-capitalist framework and back into cooperation with parties they had previously intended to wash their hands of, was the Maastricht Treaty. As Scandinavian social democracy moved to the right and began to implement cuts in the highly

advanced welfare systems of these countries, these left parties moved into the breach, clarified their position on the left, and as has been seen clearly in the case of the Swedish Left Party, were able to increase their electoral standing on this basis.

Phase 3 The third stage which further confirmed the distinctness of the new European left was the NATO bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which began in March 1999. The NATO intervention reinforced the political division between these parties which, in their greater majority opposed the bombing of Yugoslavia, and the majority leaderships of the social democratic parties – which through Blair, Jospin and Schroeder vigorously supported it. In addition, the regional cooperation of these parties was extended outside the west European boundaries towards parties such as the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia and the Polish Socialist Party, both of which had taken a strong anti-war position. Thus the political framework of these parties was established as anti-imperialist.

To conclude, the last ten years have seen the emergence and consolidation of a new European left, which has to a considerable extent overcome the traditional divisions of the labour movement. It has established itself as an anti-capitalist force, but as one which sees feminism, black liberation, the politics of sexuality, and ecological issues as fundamentally integral to working class politics, which can no longer be narrowly defined by its relationship to blue collar workers. It has played an increasingly important role in electoral politics, at regional, national and European levels, organising regularly on a west European-wide basis, and increasingly extending into eastern Europe. It has, in its great majority, supported participation in the EU, but campaigns strenuously for the building of a 'socially solidaristic Europe', and has been in the forefront of mass campaigning against Maastricht-inspired attacks on the welfare state. It was on this basis that these parties began to achieve a level of mass popular support in the mid-1990s. Finally, through the political struggle against the NATO attacks on Yugoslavia, it has been consolidated as an anti-imperialist force. The increased support for the communist and other left anti-war parties in Greece, and for the PDS in Germany, at the European elections in June 1999, indicate the strength of popular hostility to the imperialist war-mongering of the leaders of social democracy. Such developments in the European left are enormously positive, and also absolutely vital, not only for the defence of the living and working conditions of the peoples of western Europe, but also for building and extending a united front against imperialism and the further onslaughts that will no doubt come from NATO as it continues in its pursuit of global hegemony. ★

The themes of this article are further developed in the author's forthcoming book *European communism since 1989: towards a new European left?* (published by Macmillan, January 2000)



Peggy Prior

AS THE debate on 'partnership' in British industrial relations continues to rage,¹ it is as well to consider the lessons of eleven years of this approach in Ireland. Following the collapse of an earlier form of national bargaining in the 1970s, and a short period of decentralised bargaining in the mid-1980s, Ireland adopted partnership in 1988, when the Programme for National Recovery took effect. This was to be the first in a series of tripartite agreements limiting pay rises in the private and public sectors, and was succeeded by the Programme for Economic and Social Progress (1991-1993), and the Programme for Competitiveness and Work (1994-1997).² The current agreement, Partnership 2000, came into force in 1998, with negotiations on its replacement due to start shortly. However, these agreements have always been viewed with hostility from some sections of the left, and there are strong indications that the coming negotiations will be stormy. Mandate, Ireland's second largest union, has already indicated its opposition to the Irish Congress of Trade Unions taking part in the talks, on the basis that the pacts have failed to address the concerns of members, particularly on low pay.³

A New Agenda for Economic Power Sharing outlines the stance of the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (ATGWU)⁴ on 'the illusion of partnership', and, as the title suggests, puts forward a new approach. The agreements had a number of aims: workers would accept restrictions on their pay increases, employers would create jobs and increase investment, while the government would reduce taxes, improve services and reduce poverty. The unions have kept their side of the bargain. However, the jobs which have been created are predominantly low-paid, many are part-time and most are insecure. Furthermore, tax cuts have been slanted towards higher earners, the gap between rich and poor has widened still further, and absolute poverty continues to increase.

Undoubtedly, Ireland has experienced an unprecedented boom, becoming 'the celtic tiger', but the national agreements have been less influential in this than other factors such as EU funds and foreign investment, particularly from the United States. Partnership has failed, and not only on the economic front. It has also increased the deficit in 'social wealth', with health, education, transport and housing all in continuous crisis.

Perhaps the greatest problem with partnership in Ireland is its impact on trade unionism. The agreements have reduced the ability of the unions to represent the needs and interests of members, creating a more compliant, less effective trade

union movement'. The removal of bargaining from the workplace has eroded bargaining skills and engendered a culture of passivity where 'members become consumers of trade unionism, not producers.' Union membership has fallen, for any number of reasons, but 'the removal of local bargaining has undeniably contributed to this decline. What is the incentive for workers to join ... when wage agreements are predetermined years in advance and local bargaining has little or no effect...?'

The solution, as the ATGWU sees it (and as the British trade union movement is starting to realise), is to organise. However, this entails other considerations, not least political ones. 'Any agreement is ultimately a political agreement. The problem with past agreements is that they have been based on the wrong politics.' What is needed is a new consensus in Irish politics, one that will fight for the interests of working people and their trade unions, and one that is firmly grounded in the left. The pamphlet proposes that this will only be achieved if union members, through the renewal of the local bargaining agenda, are empowered to create a new democratic, participatory activism. Only then can a new political bloc, into which this activism can be channelled, be created.

The blueprint drawn up by the ATGWU is, as the authors emphasise, practical and feasible. Rather than abandon national agreements altogether, they propose that a new, three-tier approach be adopted. This would give a national flat-rate increase, supplemented by a link to national or sectoral pay norms and, where performance merits it, a locally-agreed increase. However, the strength of this publication lies in two other areas. First, in the compelling arguments for a new approach to left politics and trade unionism in Ireland. And second, in the warnings it contains for those on the right of the movement in Britain who are determined to drag us further down the road of 'partnership'. ★

Notes

1 See for example Kelly, J. 'Social partnership in Britain: good for profits, bad for jobs and unions'

Communist Review 30, Autumn 1999; Murray, A. 'Adding value or cutting costs?' New Statesman 6 September 1999

2 Hillery, B. 'The Institutions of Industrial Relations' in Murphy, T. and Roche, W., eds. Irish Industrial Relations in Practice Oak Tree Press, Dublin, 1994

3 Morning Star, 13 October 1999

4 The ATGWU is the Irish Region of the Transport and General Workers' Union, covering both the North and the Republic.

Naturally, the pamphlet, like the agreements themselves, covers only the Republic.



Hard labour for women

Anne Kane



WOMEN WERE central to Labour's election victory in May 1997. The gender gap in voting which produced Labour defeats through the 1980s and 90s was closed. The context of this achievement was the long campaign by women party members for policy and structural changes which would allow the party to be more representative of women. The driving force behind these changes was the revolution in the economic and social position of women from the 1950s onwards, in particular the massive further entry of women into employment.

Policies like women-only shortlists – which underlay the increased number of Labour women candidates, and the 101 women MPs – meant that the party carried a certain feminist credibility and expectations with it into office. Women journalists wrote enthusiastically of their hopes that the result would 'change society'. So why is it that half way through the parliament the tone of much feminist commentary on the government has turned sour?

The heads of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) and the Commission for Racial Equality have both condemned the government for failing to introduce comprehensive and anticipated gender and race equality reforms. Even the infamous defender of lone parent benefit cuts, Harriet Harman, has joined in, saying she doesn't 'believe that women feel this is their government'.

A look at the government's record reveals a programme which has many dangers for a majority of women, and explains something of this turn in opinion. It reveals policies which are aimed at exploiting the contradictions in the social position of women – the 'dual role' women are expected to play in the family and in employment – instead of policies which can resolve this contradiction.

In his speech to the last Labour Party conference Tony Blair produced a definition of equality which threw light on the government's policies towards women since. Pronouncing the need for a 'society that treats us all equally, where the closed doors of snobbery and prejudice, ignorance and poverty, fear and injustice no longer bar our way to fulfilment', he qualified his vision. His 'equality'

would be 'not equal incomes' but 'true equality: equal worth, an equal chance of fulfilment, equal access to knowledge and opportunity'.

This exploitation of the language of equality while failing to tackle the fundamentals of inequality – based precisely in such tangibles as income and wealth – has become a familiar feature of Tony Blair's administration. Its significance is in the fact key policies have now been dropped – from the abandonment of the women-only shortlist policy and downgrading of the women's organisation within the Labour Party itself through to a hoped for Ministry for Women within the government. Glitzy exercises like the 'Listening to Women' roadshow have been mounted. But after apparently talking to 30,000 women, this merely concluded that women had still not achieved a 'balance between work and home', and that the government was going to respond to this 'imbalance' by 'spelling out the benefits of flexible working and involving businesses in getting this message across'. Where there have been positive steps, they have been either very minimal or conditional: Child Benefit, for example, was raised by £2.50 a week, but with a clear statement of intent to end its universal character in future by introducing taxation for higher earners.

These very limited steps are the corollary of the agenda the government is pursuing. This is centred around three elements. Firstly, dismantling the post-war welfare state. Secondly, the development of a 'flexible' labour market, through which women will be pressured to find a wholly individual 'balance' between work and home. Thirdly, a coercive family agenda – which has been misrepresented as a 'democratisation of the family' in the terminology of Tony Blair's 'favourite intellectual' Anthony Giddens.

Government policies make sense in that women form a core component of a low paid, flexible labour market. In this respect the government's resistance to toughen up the laws on equal pay and employment discrimination, as demanded by the Equal Opportunities Commission, is significant. The EOC wants legislation to make it possible for



groups of workers to take legal action on unequal pay, arguing that 'employment tribunals should have the power to make general findings and general recommendations. Employment tribunals should be allowed to recommend changes to a collective agreement' allowing rulings as to whether 'a collective agreement or pay structure discriminates against women or men'. The EOC's recommendation would end restrictions of the present law whereby only a specific individual can take a case. The wide loopholes in this law have been repeatedly exploited by employers. The EOC also recommends shifting the burden of proof onto employers in discrimination cases so that 'when someone presents facts which suggest they have faced direct or indirect discrimination, the respondent must prove that there has been no breach of the principle of equal treatment'.

Such an update is long overdue – after more than 20 years of equal pay laws the average woman worker is still paid nearly a fifth less than the average man. But the government is blocking a change in the law aimed at facilitating pay equality actions because it thinks 'any such move would add to the burdens on companies'. In the sense that employers might have to pay more wages, it would indeed add to their 'burdens'. Currently the burden is being borne by, mainly female, employees working on very low levels of pay.

It was in this context that government ministers, seized on the fact that the New Earnings Survey showed that the average pay gap between men and women full-time workers has narrowed slightly in the last year. Average hourly earnings of full-time women workers increased by 5.5 per cent compared with a 4.3 per cent growth in men's earnings. This meant the average 'pay gap between men and women fell from 20% to 19%'.

Although this countered the widening of the gap between average male and female pay during the first year of the Labour government, the figures still leave a huge divergence between male and female pay. Non-manual women workers are still earning 69.2 per cent of the pay of men in the same category, while manual women are earning 74.4 per cent of the equivalent men's pay. The EOC points out that women working full-time are earning 'only 72 per cent [men's] average weekly earnings'.

As averages conceal as much as they reveal, it is important to look at the extremes of pay. If the distribution of hourly earnings is considered – which show what median pay level, and what the highest and lowest paid men and women are earning – it is clear that huge gaps remain between male and female pay at all levels. So although women's full time median earnings rose more than men's between 1998 and 1999, for example, the median rate of pay for women working full-time in non-manual jobs is currently only 70.4 per cent of men in the same category. The median rate of pay for women working full-time in manual jobs is only 71.4 per cent of median men's pay. At the highest

levels of pay, men massively outstrip women: non-manual male workers in the top 10 per cent pay bracket earned £22.90 an hour compared to £15.78 for women in this category. Even in the lowest paid category – the bottom ten per cent of earners in manual jobs – women are only earning 79.9 per cent of the equivalent male pay.

More important, are the claims made about the trend the figures were supposed to show. Ministers argued that the figures showed that the national minimum wage had had a dramatic effect on the wages of the lowest paid. Margaret Hodge, the government equalities minister, claimed that the figures showed women were 'turning the corner' towards earning the same as men. Her point was that government policies were acting to eradicate the pay gap, even if very slowly. Is this true?

Well, it is true that the period in which the figures were collected (March to May 1999) straddles the introduction of the minimum wage on 1 April and that the wages of the lowest paid group of workers (in the bottom 10 per cent pay group) rose most. The figures therefore suggest that the national minimum wage, although set at an extremely low £3.60 an hour for workers over 22 years old (£3 for 18 to 21 year olds and no level below 18), did see pay rises for the very lowest paid workers. Those who saw the biggest percentage rises were in notoriously low paid occupations such as hairdressing and waitressing.

But there is no reason to conclude, as Margaret Hodge does, that this represents a trend – even at a snail's pace – towards equal pay. On the contrary, as there is no formula which will ensure that the minimum wage rises in proportion to average earnings each year, the real value of the minimum wage cannot help but fall over time. This was the key issue when the precise details of the minimum wage legislation was being hammered out. The Labour leadership secured both a minimum wage set at a level so low it could only lift the pay of the very lowest paid, and also that there be no objective formula to regulate uprating.

Rather than turning the corner towards equal pay, the minimum wage as it now stands forms a consistent part of the government's particular strategy for women's employment. Declaring that this is to set women 'free to work' and liberate their 'potential', this strategy is, in fact, centred around using women as the main component of an enlarged, low paid, flexible labour force by cutting and restructuring benefits to 'make work pay'. Since women's potential for paid work is to be liberated at the same time as the welfare state is being pared down, through both the cuts in benefits and in core services, there is unlikely to be any decrease in part-time, shift and non-standard hours work for women. Nor does this permit any positive solution on how to 'balance work and home'. Consequently women continue to make up over four-fifths of all part-time employees; although the number of men in part time work is rising, nearly half of all such

'... the government is blocking a change in the law aimed at facilitating pay equality actions because it thinks 'any such move would add to the burdens on companies'.



male workers are under 25 and a fifth are 60 and over. Moreover, even very limited initiatives like the Working Time Directive and 'family friendly' inducements to employers are rendered meaningless if a low minimum wage means millions of workers have to work long hours or in multiple jobs to survive. Parental leave which has to be voluntarily agreed by employers, which is unpaid and has to be taken in blocs of at least one week makes a further mockery of the idea that these are policies for women's liberation.

The shift towards supporting low income households through tax credits instead of welfare benefits is a key part of this employment strategy. This shift has a clear ideological message: that people and families suffering poverty as a result of low paid employment deserve some financial assistance which unemployed people in the same position do not. As Tony Blair put it to the Labour conference delegates, the point is: 'making working pay more than benefits for hard-working families through the Working Families Tax Credit'.

It is in this context that support for 'strong families' has become a hallmark of Tony Blair's government. The family – and women in particular – is conceived as the political scapegoat for the social problems whose real cause is the dismantling of the welfare state. At the Labour conference Tony Blair conjured up two alternative family visions: 'two babies side by side...Yet two totally different lives ahead of them. One returns with his mother to a bed and breakfast that is cold, damp, cramped. A mother who has no job, no family to support her, sadder still ... a father nowhere to be seen...The second child returns to a prosperous home, grandparents desperate to share the caring, and a father with a decent income and an even larger sense of pride. They're already thinking about schools, friends she can make, new toys they can buy. Expectations are sky high, opportunities truly limitless.'

The difference between these two children's life expectations is evidently financial. Equalising their life potential could be achieved by directing welfare policies towards levelling up the income in the lone parent's household towards that of the two parent household. The government has made it clear this is ruled out. One of its first acts was to cut lone parent benefits – with the 47 Labour MPs who voted against the cut reflecting wide feminist and public revulsion at a move which built on the Tories ideological campaign against single mothers. The policy rested on accepting the false claims by Peter Lilley and ministers of the previous Tory government that lone parents face no additional costs compared with two parent families. In fact, lone parents top the poverty indicators across the board. Compared to two parent families lone parent ones are more to be living in overcrowded accommodation. Two thirds of lone parent families live below the poverty line and are more than twice as likely as children in two parent families to go

without basic necessities. Huge numbers of people are represented by these statistics – lone parent families represent more than a fifth of all families with dependent children.

In his conference speech Tony Blair put the inequalities lone parent families face down to facts like the lone mother, in his example, has no job, no built in family support and, saddest of all, no man. The woman without the man is condemned for having 'no job', but the woman with the man is assumed not to need a job because the man has a 'decent income'. Lone parent poverty and the social disadvantages which face children born into poverty – whether with one or two parents – is not to be eradicated by a welfare state but something to be blamed on the poor or the lone parents themselves, and used to lever them into low paid jobs. Hence cuts in lone parent benefits were combined with the 'New Deal' for lone parents and the extension, via the Welfare Reform Bill, of the Single Gateway forcing lone parents to a 'back to work' interview or risk benefit sanctions. Social Security Secretary Alistair Darling argued that government reforms meant that lone parents had no excuse for not being in work as there was 'now an option for all lone parents to find work and to make work pay'. Unemployment is, of course, greater among lone parents: 68 per cent of mothers in two parent families are employed, compared with only 48 per cent of lone mothers. This difference doesn't reflect an unwillingness to work – the impression compulsory interviews and ministerial speeches are intended to convey – but the lack of free or low cost childcare and of employment which can skip the 'poverty trap'. These facts need more substantial measures than encouraging to employers to be 'family friendly' and limited tax credits for child care costs which do not take account of the flexible arrangements many parents need. Otherwise lone parents will be condemned to ongoing poverty, whether in or out of paid employment.

A theoretical framework for the coercive family policies which are the other side of the coin of dismantling the welfare state has been supplied by Anthony Giddens, author of *The Third Way*. Giddens is described as an academic who has 'made a strong impact on the evolution of New Labour'. He accepts the revolution in family forms in the last 30 years as a fact: 'recapturing the traditional family is a non-starter'. But he rejects 'the notion that a proliferation of family forms is both desirable and unproblematic' as 'not convincing'. His book makes the politically motivated claim – repeated many times by Tony Blair – that children don't do so well if raised by one rather than two parents. Although he thinks part of the reason economic, 'about half comes from inadequate parental attention and lack of social ties'. His solution is the creation of a rigid grid of enforceable familial responsibilities: a 'contractual commitment... made by each parent as a binding



matter of law, with unmarried fathers having the same rights and the same obligations. Both sexes would have to recognise that sexual encounters carry the chance of life-time responsibilities'. The life-time responsibility would work the other way around too: 'Children should have responsibilities to their parents... It is worth at least considering whether this should be legally binding...perhaps this is a notion whose time has come'.

Neither Giddens nor the government seriously intend to go down this road fully. The function of this and of 'family values' rhetoric from government ministers is to provide the justification for slashing welfare spending and the political scapegoat for the social disasters which will follow. An 'Americanisation' of welfare and work runs through policy. This means that increasing numbers of women are levered in to paid work at the same time as a disintegrating welfare state is throwing a greater degree of the burden of social reproduction back on to women and 'the family'. It is a trend which is absolutely bound to produce the sorts of social crises which has accompanied this combination in the United States. It is with the intention of undermining a progressive social reaction to this crisis that the volume of 'family values' political rhetoric is being increased.

These factors run through a range of policies about to come on stream.

The government's consultation document Supporting Families aimed to see 'measures to strengthen the institution of marriage'. These included beefing up the 1996 Family Law Act, which required people intending to divorce to attend counselling sessions and endure a 'period for reflection and consideration' before a divorce application could be made. The document suggested making this two stages of meetings and encouragement to 'meet a marriage counsellor'. There is absolutely no chance that such policies would change the patterns of divorce and separation. Problems in its own pilot scheme together with widespread objections, may have forced a rethink on this particular proposal. The upsurge in divorce following the Divorce Law Reform Act in the late 1960s – with year on year a majority of applications initiated by women – shadowed the increased entry of women into employment and the significance of the welfare state to women. Changes in the character of both of these material factors of the type described are simply likely to make the experience of divorce more miserable for women – those with children in particular. The government's main aim is to strike an ideological stand against divorce – in order to legitimise the withholding of services and benefits to lone parents, children and post-divorce households. The message is: marriage is good, divorce is bad and lone parent families who suffer financially after divorce have themselves to blame.

Changes to the Child Support Act will reinforce this message in a very practical sense. The whole

point of the Child Support Act, introduced by the Conservatives, was to cut the cost of lone parenthood to the Treasury. The Act proved a disaster for lone parents and their children. Huge numbers of lone parent families fail to receive maintenance either on time, in full or at all. Rather than examine the key principles of the act – that lone parents in receipt of benefits should have them cut in order to enforce dependence on ex-partners – the new proposals will tighten the dependence of lone parents on their former partners. It will do little to raise living standards in lone parent households.

The exact shape of the legislation – announced in the Queens Speech – is yet to be made clear, but the changes proposed in the Green Paper are severe. They are likely to make it more difficult for women to claim 'good cause' for not seeking maintenance from the child's father. The Paper says this clause should not be 'open to abuse by parents who wish to evade their responsibilities'. The Paper explains that a lone mother is more likely to co-operate with the CSA because 'she will know that if she fails to co-operate without "good cause" she risks not only the current benefit penalty but the maintenance allowance as well'. These proposals threaten the many women who fear contact with the father of their child. Secondly, flat rate maintenance levels are likely to discriminate against the lower paid. Rather than maintenance levels reflecting proportions of differing incomes and taking into account real circumstances, the rates will be 15 per cent of the non-resident parent's income for one child, 20 per cent for two and so on. It is suggested that current exemptions for those who have a second family or a disability be scraped. Criminal penalties may be applied to those who fail to comply. Defaulters will face fines of 25 per cent of the amount owed and possibly the loss of their driving licence. There is no reason to believe the 60,000 people exempted from paying maintenance under the current system are likely to be able to afford these stringent flat rate payments.

An ideological campaign which stresses the importance of fathers is accompanying these changes. The CSA Green Paper leads into its proposals with statements like: 'fathers are vital to their children's well-being; children do best when they have two positive and committed parents'. A high profile conference last November urged that fathers stop 'being "undervalued and overlooked" by family services'. The driving force of this campaign is solidly economic.

At the same time, the report of the Social Exclusion Unit on teenage pregnancies proposes to respond to the fact that Britain has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe by stigmatising and penalising teenage pregnancy and teenage mothers even more. Teenage parents are to have their rights to council housing removed, with teenage mothers housed in 'supervised semi-independent housing'. The report acknowledges

'The function ... of 'family values' rhetoric from government ministers is to provide both the justification for slashing welfare spending'



'The welfare state, with all its practical and political limitations, helped spread the cost for the reproduction of human labour across society. This shaped the context in which new layers of women from the 1950s onwards came into employment.'

that the areas of high teenage pregnancy are also those of greatest economic deprivation. Nothing, however, is proposed to reduce the poverty and resulting lack of hope and information which leads to high levels of teenage pregnancy.

Other policies have particular implications for women. A continual undermining of the state pension and push to private and top-up pensions holds specific dangers for women. The older the age group, the more women outnumber men. Added to this, women's interrupted employment patterns and lower pay mean private pensions are a none starter for many. The government's stated intention to address the financial crises women face following divorce, retirement and in older age by 'getting women better informed when it comes to money, savings and investments, including by working in partnership with the Financial Services Authority' will do nothing to answer pensioners' demands for a liveable income. Some cuts in disability benefits will disadvantage women more than men, particularly the abolition of Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA), where 61 per cent of the recipients are women, rising to 70 per cent amongst older women. SDA is received by disabled women who have not been in the labour market and have not therefore built up the contributions record necessary to claim Incapacity Benefit. The government's initiatives on domestic violence, which are strong on describing the problem but propose relatively small increases in funding for front-line services, will in any case be undermined by the greater material limits women face as a result of the government's welfare and employment strategy. The EOC has attacked government failure to legislate against the discrimination lesbians face in employment and other areas of their lives.

This combination of policies was bound to meet political opposition. For that reason they were accompanied by a political disenfranchisement of Labour women. The Labour Women's Organisation has been politically gutted in a way that ridicules speeches about equality and PR projects claiming to 'listen to women'. The Labour women's conference has been transformed from an organisation which had political discussion around policy positions submitted by local sections and trade unions to a hollow shell which has no influence or connection with the party's policy-making process. Instead of an annual conference, women members have a rally and 'training' for a day and a half. They receive lectures from cabinet members. Many of the trade unions affiliated to the Labour Party have more meaningful women's political structures than the Labour Party, yet the leaderships of many of the same unions accepted this political downgrading. As with the current attempts to close down local Labour general committees, this was carried out in the name of greater involvement. Policies the women's conference pioneered – such as women-only shortlists – have been abandoned. Many of the

women MPs elected in 1997 were in seats that saw a bigger than average swing to Labour, creating the potential for a fall in the number of women MPs at the next election. Women still represent less than a quarter of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Were Labour's women's organisation politically functioning it is certain that many policies pursued since 1997 would have faced a more organised challenge. The public political impact of those women MPs who opposed lone parent and other welfare cuts was dramatic. Their stand registered strongly with women members and voters. Had the reforms of the women's organisation not been carried through, those other women MPs who owed their jobs to the long fight of feminists for positive discrimination and policies which could close the gender gap, but who supported policies harmful to women, would face more direct pressure to be accountable to women members' views. In the meantime, the absence of channels which can express such a political struggle feeds a damaging cynicism about the value of feminist positive action policies at all. Amongst women themselves, frustration at the current state of the women's organisation is widespread. The Labour Women's Action Committee has called for changes which would give the women's organisation at least the same limited policy-making structures as the rest of the Labour Party. But support from the trade unions affiliated to the Labour Party would be needed to take such demands forward.

Together these policies undermine the social position women have gained through the post-war period. The welfare state, with all its practical and political limitations, helped spread the cost for the reproduction of human labour across society. This shaped the context in which new layers of women from the 1950s onwards came into employment. This was, in turn, the material basis which gave mass impetus to feminism and to a transformation of the labour movement. The upheaval in household and family forms, rising divorce rates, growing awareness of domestic violence, sexual abuse and much else of family life, through the 1970s and 80s, were also precipitated by such factors. Undermining the welfare state and forcing women to take on the strain, while intensifying women's role in employment, will have a brutal material impact, limiting choices, stifling opportunity and increasing inequality.

Women are not only a majority of society, they are also almost 50 per cent of the labour force. Despite the current setbacks for the Labour women's organisation, women are politically organised to an unprecedented degree. The contradiction between these facts and policies aiming to exploit the fundamental basis of women's oppression – in the family – while intensifying their exploitation at work, is powerful indeed. Developing politics and alliances capable of seizing this contradiction and advancing an alternative, hegemonic, course is the challenge for feminists and socialists. ★



Rehabilitating socialist realism

Nick Wright

THE BRITISH left has not always been agnostic on questions of taste. For the period when Marxism exercised a powerful influence in the cultural world – the period of anti-fascist unity and the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union – aesthetics was at the centre of political thought as decisive sections of the creative intelligentsia looked to Marxism and the Communist Party for guidance on both political and cultural questions. The Communist Party conducted a fierce attack on views and trends it held to be incorrect and in defence of the party conception of historical and dialectical materialism.

In combating mechanical conceptions – and emphasising the proposition that the superstructure of ideas and institutions does not directly and mechanically reflect the productive forces in society – a leading party thinker, James Klugmann was explicit.

‘There is no such thing as a direct connection between this or that technical development of machinery and general developments of artistic, religious or philosophical views. Power driven machinery is used both by capitalism and by socialism. So are tractors, electricity and atomic energy. There is no such thing as an electrical philosophy or an atomic art. And it is only in such currents of thought and art that are in essence reactionary such as the Bauhaus architects or the Italian futurists that you find such theories peddled.’¹

This highly partisan rejection of ‘formalist art’, expressed at the point when the Cold War was intensifying, was to become deeply unfashionable.

The conventional, Cold War, view of revolutionary art and culture proceeds from the division of Soviet history in two distinct eras. Especially privileged is the period of the revolutionary avant-garde characterised by innovation, a break with the past and an impatience with realist conventions. Counterposed to this lost and heroic age is its presumed opposite – the aesthetically inferior period of socialist realism characterised by dogma and hostility to experiment.

Socialist Realism is identified with a particular style – particularly in painting – and with the personal authority of Stalin. In the Soviet Union modernist styles were presumed to have vanished in a sea of repression with but a few heroic individuals keeping alive the flame of creativity.

The political utility of this schema to those threatened by working class political power is obvious. It gained general currency during the sharpened post-war clash between opposing social systems and their ideologies and Western, particularly British, attitudes to Soviet culture had to undergo several shifts before the Cold War vision was generally accepted.

Of course, Soviet reality was infinitely more complex and paradoxical than its western critics allowed but it was not until the dismantling of socialist relations of production – and its related instruments of political power – in the USSR that art historians working in capitalist countries were able to develop a more balanced view based on a closer engagement with the work itself. It is a paradox that it is only with a greater familiarity with the full diversity of Soviet art that Western art historians are able to bring to bear the apparatus of a critical method which takes account of economic and political context rather than deploy mechanical categories or Cold War prejudice.

Particularly refreshing is a newer body of work which is both better informed about Soviet art and history and which takes as its starting point the common sense – and dialectical – principle that all societies bear the marks of their predecessors.² These new trends thus are concerned with the development of Soviet society, its economic base and its transformed superstructure of culture, education, technology, ideology and art.

The distinguishing feature of Soviet cultural practice was its close correspondence with developments in the economy – which in revolutionary conditions and with rapid industrialisation and collectivisation entailed a profound cultural revolution. It was this which gave added prestige to a communist cultural politics on a global scale. A second feature, which still has the



'A hierarchy was established in which artists who worked in a representational mode were deemed to be engaged with problems of a lower order than those working with pure abstraction.'

capacity to mystify bourgeois critics, was the unashamed and partisan approach by communists, which, given the leading role of the Soviet Communist Party enshrined in constitution and ideology, entailed the exercise of state power and patronage.

"In society based upon private property the artist produces for the market, needs customers. Our revolution has freed artists from the yoke of these very prosaic conditions. It turned the Soviet government into their defender and client providing them with orders. Every artist, and everyone who considers himself such, has a right to create freely, to follow his ideal, regardless of everything.

*"But then we are communists, we ought not stand idly by and give chaos a free hand to. We should steer this process according to a worked out plan and must shape its results."*³

The specific forms of post-war western hostility to Soviet art practice are themselves the product of particular political circumstances. In the US, the post-war decades were marked by the eclipse of realist and humanist traditions in gallery art in which the heritage of the New Deal was dismantled. Corporate clients painted over murals which challenged private property, Hollywood was purged and representational art gave way to a triumphant formalism.

The leading US critic of the period – the lapsed trotskysist Clement Greenberg – argued that 'the best art of our day, tends increasingly to be abstract. And most attempts to reverse this tendency seem to result in second hand, second rate painting...'⁴

A hierarchy was established in which artists who worked in a representational mode were deemed to be engaged with problems of a lower order than those working with pure abstraction. The debate – in as far as debate existed – turned not so much on the clear issues of realism versus abstraction but rather on the presumed opposition between an engagement with purely formal questions and art with a subject. Greenberg, with typical sectarian fervour, argued that 'In fact it seems as though today the image and object can only be put back into art only by pastiche or parody.'

A key role in this process was played by the transatlantic art market driven by private buyers and US institutions, particularly the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Its founding director, Alfred H Barr Jnr was both the sponsor of the fashion in modern European painting and the best informed US authority on early Soviet art. He established a theoretical framework which suggested that the avante garde Supremacists and Constructivists were rooted in the break made possible by Cubism, and that the later turn in Soviet art practice which established realist and representational modes in an officially dominant position signalled a departure from the world mainstream and a loss of relevance.

By the sixties, this hostility to realist conventions was the orthodoxy. In Britain, the most easily

available text – required reading for art students – echoed the contemporary rejection of representational painting. Herbert Read – in politics a kind of late libertarian (and a willing enough collaborator with communists in the Artists International Association) – dismissed both the monumental public art of the Mexican muralists and all realist painting as lacking 'a modern quality'.

Of the Mexicans he wrote, 'Like some of their Russian contemporaries, they have adopted a propagandist programme for their art which seems to me to place it outside the stylistic evolution which is my main concern...'⁵

Sponsorship of abstract visual style by the state security organs of the US played a key role in popularising the new orthodoxy and conditioned the interaction of media and art markets.

In Britain, the assimilation of this approach was slower than in the US and, less driven by covert secret service funding, was less politically engaged. Market forces impelled both the export of European visual style to the US and its re-export as Abstract Expressionism alongside the increasing US domination of mass culture.

In art schools the gradual retreat – through the fifties and sixties – of representational art and art teaching proceeded alongside an increasingly vigorous development of fashion, design and media production studies.

In contradiction to the US influence there developed a spirited defence of what was conceived as British tradition. This heritage – conflated with realist style – was a significant feature of the period and was overtly the expression of a perspective shared with Soviet aesthetics. It was not just an explicitly political project for the Communist Party and its allies but rather echoed important trends beyond the ranks of the politically engaged.

Soviet cultural practice was undeniably popular in Britain principally as a result of the alliance politics of the anti-fascist struggle and the Second World War. The pre-war British public had become familiar with the main principles of socialist realism which were presented in a non-antagonistic manner alongside a nuanced and stylistically diverse display of architecture, sculpture, painting, theatre, film, graphic arts and crafts. The special 1935 issue of *The Studio* 'Art in the USSR' carried an uncompromising exposition of soviet aesthetics .

'Our conception of art is based upon the principles of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. The Marx-Lenin-Stalin doctrine defines with adequate clearness the role of art in human society. Art, as one of the "ideological superstructures" towering above the foundations of a given system of social relationships, plays the role of a specific weapon for gaining knowledge of reality. Art is not an instrument of impassive contemplation or passive reflection. By the sheer logic of social evolution that is impelled by



the struggle of classes, it either tends towards a revolutionary change of the existing social order, or serves the interests of its maintenance and consolidation. There is no "art for art's sake." Art, at all stages of human history, has performed social functions, and, consequently, cannot be considered as something aloof from politics, from the material interests and ideology of the social classes.

The process of development of Soviet art is the process of consolidation of all the creative forces of the country on the basis of socialist ideology...'⁶

Soviet aesthetics uncompromisingly asserted a continuity with pre-revolutionary Russian traditions – of landscape painting, and of a committed realist literature but it also privileged national elements and this, alongside the continued resonance of earlier formalist experiments meant that Soviet painters worked in a more pluralist environment than Cold War myth would have it.

By presenting the Soviet era as a monolithic whole – an illusion which some communist propaganda reinforced – the distinctions between different periods are blurred. Conflicts between competing trends among Soviet artists – some of which can be ascribed to battles for the patronage of the newly formed proletarian state – marked the first post-revolutionary period. But the echoes of these struggles can be heard decades later.

The invasion of the USSR by Nazi Germany produced a powerful impulse from the state to emphasise consensual elements in the national and Soviet mass consciousness and marked a development of official policy. In the immediate post-war period socialist realism became identified for propaganda purposes with a highly finished academic style and kind of Bolshevik court painting but what is striking about the immediate pre-war period is the diversity of realist styles and the relatively transparent character of the art critical discourse.

This is not to say that political authority, or the competent authorities in the creative unions (who controlled the instruments of patronage), were neutral but rather that different styles remained the subject of critical scrutiny. Indeed, in 1935, reporting on the Soviet painting scene for a British audience, A. Bassak gave an exhaustive roll call of well known artists, recording by name the progress – among others, of Malevich and Tatlin – in addition to distinguishing between schools drawing on the traditions of the Academy, of the Russian encounter with Impressionism and of the *Peredvizhniki*.⁷

Official Soviet aesthetics unequivocally rejected formalist experiments. Political power and patronage – waged through the creative unions – policed the political line. In retrospect, it is clear that official ideology overestimated the extent to which political loyalty to the socialist state entailed a fixed adherence to the dominant orthodoxy. And this is as true among artists and critics as is among

workers and peasants. But there were few illusions about the necessity for continued struggle over aesthetic questions or of the intimate links which bound questions of ideology and aesthetics.

And the new mass public for all forms of cultural production which the revolution, socialist construction and then the war unleashed ensured that Soviet artists, increasingly less drawn from the remnants of the middle classes, were less able to develop a professional ideology which set them aside from public life.

In this complex pre-war period, El Lissitzky, Rodchenko and Nikolai Troshin, with John Heartfield, collaborated in the production of the most public presentation of Soviet life available abroad – *USSR in Construction* – which, in Russian, English, French and German, carried constructivist aesthetics and montage techniques to audiences of millions. It is a mark of the determining power of bourgeois academic orthodoxy that this exuberant exercise in 'formalism', which was to be found in innumerable working class homes, passes unremarked by most art historical commentaries because it subverts the notion that the period of Stalin's leadership is completely identified with an homogeneous style.

Contrary to stereotype, a constant theme running through communist cultural politics was an engagement with formalist trends. The classical tradition was continuously invoked against the tendency of such 'formalist currents' to reject the past.

Adequate authority for this approach could easily be found in the expressed views of Marx and Lenin but, if formalism was identified with the implicit 'leftism' of the early post-revolutionary period, the material basis for the later synthesis of Russian national style, classical tradition and Soviet subject matter lay precisely in the character of socialist transformation which the country subsequently underwent.

A leading Soviet cultural functionary, writing for a British audience, argued: *'Of course, the coming over of the basic mass of Soviet artists to the viewpoint of the proletariat was a complex and lengthy process which grew ever deeper with the successful development of our socialist construction.*

This became particularly evident during the latest period of Soviet history, when the socialist system had already clearly demonstrated its vitality, during the period of fulfilment of the great Five-Year Plans.

We can now speak of the organic union of the Soviet artist with the life of the country, with the interests and aspirations of the masses of the people, as of an indisputable fact.

Intimately bound up with the whole of Soviet reality, the art of the Soviet Union has gradually developed its own style, adequate to the epoch of socialist construction.

The numerous abstract formalistic currents (futurism, cubism, constructivism, etc.) which had made their appearance during the pre-war and war



periods very soon ceased to exist.

"Instead of those currents, which in their numerous theoretical manifestos and by their whole practice had urged the necessity of breaking with the art of past centuries, there came other currents which took a different attitude to the cultural heritage of the past. In spite of the movement of the 'Leftists' the real historic development of Soviet art proceeded on the principle of critical assimilation of the art of past centuries.

"As a result of persistent and profound work on new Soviet themes, on the phenomena of living realities, com

bined with critical assimilation of the art of past centuries and the acquisition of real craftsmanship, Soviet art began to master the creative method which determined the whole of its development, viz., the method of socialist realism."⁷

The extent to which left wing politics entailed conformity to socialist realist style among practicing artists is exaggerated. Firstly, the anti-fascist unity of the period, the example of socialist construction contrasted to the economic and political conditions in the West and later, the resistance to fascist occupation in Europe, meant that very diverse sectors of opinion felt themselves allies in bigger questions than style.

Secondly, particularly after the war, the adherence to the communist movement of prominent artists of great prestige working in non realist styles – artists like Picasso and Leger – produced a kind of willing schizophrenia. But formally, communists were committed to a partisan approach in art as in all questions of ideology.

This was not simply a feature of cultural life in the Soviet Union. It was very firmly part of British communist aesthetics in which a defence of dialectical materialism was fused with an energetic application of the base superstructure metaphor to changes in British culture and US cultural imports

A populist campaign against US imports – for example against horror comics – was linked to an attempt to forge a popular conception of a progressive realist tradition. This went alongside an equally vigorous assault on mechanical materialism, which rarely let pass an opportunity to take a swipe at non realist trends. But it was as much an expression of the general resistance of British culture to innovation as it was to Moscow's guiding hand. ★

Notes

- 1 Basis and Superstructure *Essays on Socialist Realism and the British Cultural Tradition* James Klugman, Arena p 19.
- 2 For example Mathew Culherne Brown, Brandon Taylor editors *Art of the Soviets* Manchester University Press 1993.
- 3 Quoted by Clara Zetkin *Lenin on Culture and Cultural Revolution* Progress, Moscow 1970 p 232.
- 4 *Abstract and Representational* Clement Greenberg 1954 p 7.
- 5 *Concise History of Modern Painting* Herbert Read 1969 pp 7-8.
- 6 *Art in the USSR* Studio Special Number 1935 AY Arosev p 9.
- 7 Representational school rooted in the Russian countryside and opposed to the pre-revolutionary art of the salon.

Communist Party Publications

CAPITALIST CRISIS AND GLOBAL SLUMP

Up to the minute analysis by Robert Griffiths £1.50

A MANIFESTO FOR TODAY

The relevance of the Communist Manifesto today by Martin Levy £1

WOMEN AND CLASS

Seminal text revised and updated by Mary Davis £1.50

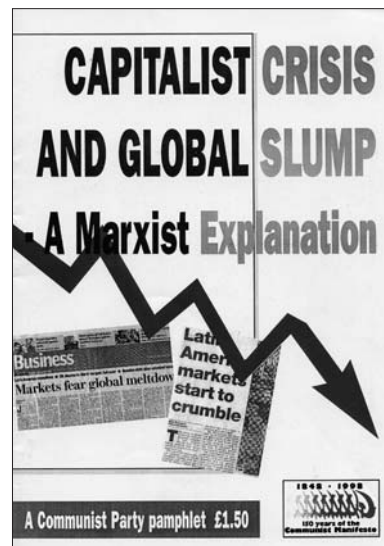
BRITISH ROAD TO SOCIALISM

Updated with a new introduction by Robert Griffiths £2

WHAT WE STAND FOR

New members introduction to the Communist Party £1

**10% discount for pre-paid bulk orders from
CPB Literature Unit F11, 787 Commercial Road,
London E14 7HG**



Join the Communist Party

I would like to join the Communist Party

Young Communist League Find out more information

Name

Address

Postcode

Age (if under 30)

Return to Communist Party, Unit F11, 787 Commercial Road, London E14 7HG



Reviews

same time as class society and proceeds to show how capitalism, through its many stages of development, has used and misused black and white women in its own interests.

A clear and simple re-stating of how the worker and capitalist exchange labour-time for wages, shows us how this ostensibly equal bargain disguises the exploitative relationship which results in the capitalist keeping the profit created by the worker's labour. In the words of playwright John Arden "...if you've got no food to eat, you're free to go without."

Wages are determined by how much capitalists think workers need to live and reproduce themselves. Using this criteria women have historically always received lower wages because they have been deemed to be dependent on men. It can be seen, therefore that oppression arises from within a class divided society.

Women have been moved in to and out of the workplace depending on the need of capitalist production. Artificially created concepts including the notion of *women's work* and *a woman's place is in the home* have all been used as justification for this ebb and flow.

The reality is that capitalism knows no morality when it comes to exploitation. The sanctity of the family and other social institutions are all readily sacrificed in the interests of profit.

Capitalism's ideological window-dressing, however spreads beyond the work place into society as a whole, and so women, irrespective of class, experience overt and covert forms of oppression. They may be *silken threads not iron chains* to use Lucy Gair Wilkinson's phrase, but nonetheless they have brought middle class women into alliances with working class women, notably on the issue of reproductive rights.

The section on rival theories aptly summarises the range of contemporary political views which emerged in the past 100 years including biological determinism and radical feminism and illustrate how this has sometimes resulted in an unwitting collaboration with capitalism or, in the case of sections of the suffrage movement a complete embrace of imperialism.

The involvement of women in the labour and trade union movement grew substantially between 1850 and 1914

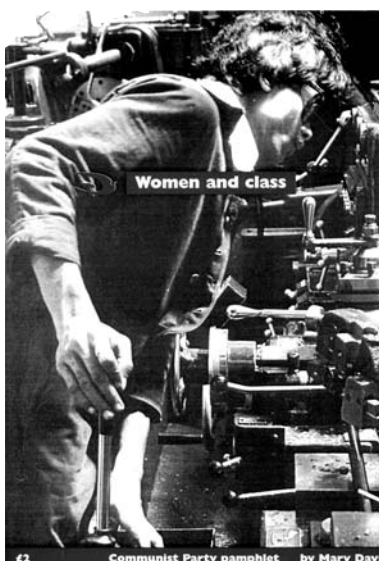
through the work of the Social Democratic Federation and National Federation of Women Workers. This is illustrated by the staggering increase of women's trade union membership from 37,000 in 1886 to 236,000 at the beginning of the First World War. Working class women had reached a new phase in their development and had found a new militancy beyond pressure group type lobbying tactics.

By engaging in economic as well as political struggle against capitalist the whole working class had become more radicalised. The growth of socialist and communist ideas throughout the movement resulted in the formation of the Communist Party.

New feminist organisations were also formed including the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and later, in 1952 the National Assembly of Women. The 1960's were particularly significant as women began to demand greater equality in the wake of economic growth, but these campaigns failed to unite women with the wider labour movement.

The final section of this pamphlet is unequivocal in its call for communist women and all those who are committed to fighting for women's liberation and an end to class exploitation, to build a broad based women's organisation which has black and white working class women as its leadership; and to ensure that the fight for women's emancipation is inextricably woven into the work of the trade union and labour movement.

Only when these two forces combine and work together can we face the challenge of eradicating capitalism and building socialism. ★



Breaking the silken threads

Women and Class

Communist Party 1999

£2 48pp

REVIEWED BY ANITA WRIGHT

BEHIND THE cover of this closely argued pamphlet can be found a timely reminder of the economic basis of women's exploitation and oppression in this age of spin doctoring.

By looking at the development of human society from its very early stages, Mary Davis shows how the primitive division of collective and domestic labour were transformed into the more exploitative form under capitalism, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries.

This extremely well informed analysis takes as its starting point the Marxist view that oppression emerged at the





Moscow and liberation

ANC: A View from Moscow

by Vladimir Shubin,
Mayibuye Books, 1999
ISBN 1-86808-439-6

REVIEWED BY BLADE NZIMANDE

OVER MANY years Vladimir Shubin was the key liaison between the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the South African liberation movement. This book is one of the most resourceful and informative to have been written in the recent period on the history of the ANC and the national liberation struggle. It is a very detailed (and also extremely frank) account of what was, perhaps, the most challenging and complex period for the movement – the years of exile, underground and armed struggle.

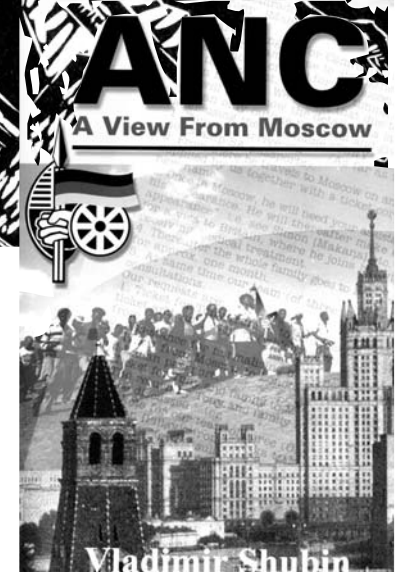
If any anti-communists are looking for a book full of KGB conspiracies, machinations and manipulations they will be disappointed. Here is a frank, and at times self-critical, but always supportive, account of the relationship between the Soviet Union and the ANC between 1960 and 1991. The book creatively weaves together the history of this relationship with an account of the national liberation struggle itself, and

the evolution and maturing of the ANC in the years of illegality, repression and intensifying national liberation struggle. The book is not merely an account of the relationship between Moscow and “Lusaka”, but an account of the South African revolution by someone who was intimately involved and dedicated most of his life in support of the liberation struggle of the South African people.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One deals with the most difficult periods of the South African struggle, the banning of the ANC and other organisations by the apartheid regime; the debates on, and beginnings of, the armed struggle; the historic ANC Morogoro Conference in 1969 and, most interestingly, the readjustments of the ANC as an underground organisation.

The shifting balance of forces

Part Two deals with the changing balance of forces in the South African revolution covering the period between 1974 and 1985. This part proceeds from the significance of the liberation of the Portuguese colonies, particularly Mozambique and Angola, and how this impacted on the ANC in exile and the mass of the people of South Africa. In addition this part deals with the landmark of the 1976 Soweto uprisings, their effect and aftermath, and how the ANC provided leadership to these



important developments. In this period the book also covers some of the really difficult challenges facing the ANC, in particular the intensification of apartheid terrorism against neighbouring states, the controversial Nkomati Accord and the beginnings of perestroika in the Soviet Union. Perestroika brought some strains into the relationship between the Soviet Unions and the ANC.

Negotiations and the road to power. There is new information, from this period, around the beginnings of contacts between the ANC and the apartheid regime, the part played by the Soviet Union in this, as well as some of the internal debates within the ANC and the SACP. Though some of these aspects have been covered in other books and writings, Shubin provides new insights and details.

Part Three of the book (1985-1991) largely focuses on the road to power for the liberation movement, against the background of escalating mass struggles, increasing contacts between the ANC and the apartheid regime, the unbanning

▲ Every patriot a combatant

Linocut by Norman Kaplan



of the ANC, laying a foundation for the full-blown negotiations after 1990. Some interesting new details about Operation Vula and the role of the Soviet Union in this regard are provided, ending up with the sad episode of the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Shubin seems to hesitate a little when it comes to the Gorbachev and perestroika era. Perhaps he is faced here with a dilemma of trying to assess the implications of perestroika for the ANC, but not having enough space to provide a detailed analysis and reflection on perestroika itself. For this period Shubin gives a seemingly contradictory account. On the one hand, he claims, and indeed does provide concrete evidence, that the relationship between the ANC and the Soviet Union strengthened in many respects. Yet, at the same time, he provides evidence of cracks in the relationship. In particular, Shubin highlights the fact that in the period of perestroika there was a disjuncture between the activities of the Soviet Foreign Ministry and the International Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (where he was located).

Whilst relations between the ANC and the international department remained strong, there were problems with some of the activities of the foreign ministry officials, particularly in relation to their contacts with the apartheid regime. An interesting but brief account is given on relations between the Soviet Union and the De Beers mining company, at a time when the entire foreign policy orientation of the Soviet Union towards the West began changing. Shubin also cites some very problematic statements by certain Soviet academics and Foreign Ministry officials on the question of negotiations between the ANC and the apartheid regime.

These strains were being felt inside of the ANC, and Shubin provides an interesting quote from Chris Hani, contained in the minutes of an ANC National Working Committee meeting in Lusaka on 2 May 1989. Cde Chris is quoted saying:

“Even in the USSR some academics and individuals in the Foreign Affairs Ministry have declared in favour of a negotiated settlement in South Africa. The regime has come out on top in South Africa (they have argued) and the MDM is (said to be) exhausted and

burned out. These views have had an effect on the membership, some of whom believe we are preparing for negotiations.”(p.352)

Shubin does of course point out that this did not mean that Cde Chris was against negotiations, but that he was concerned that statements by Soviet foreign ministry officials and Soviet academics at the time were causing confusions within the South African movement.

Notwithstanding these wobbles at the end, this book clearly underlines that the Soviet Union and, in particular, the CPSU stood firmly behind and gave unconditional support to the ANC throughout the 30 years of its illegality. Indeed the people of South Africa are greatly indebted to the role that the Soviet Union played in supporting the South African revolution. Shubin's book also effectively demystifies this relationship and demonstrates the extent to which the apartheid regime, through its intelligence apparatuses, supported by the West in many instances, tried to deliberately distort this relationship as part of an attempt to extend its political life. It was for this reason, for instance, that on receiving the Soviet delegation to the ANC National Conference on 3 July 1991 in Durban, of which Shubin himself was part, Cde Nelson Mandela said unequivocally, “Without your support we would not be where we are now” (p.387).

The book chronicles the nature and extent of assistance that the Soviet Union gave to the ANC and the SACP, pointing out that virtually every request made by the liberation movement was met, ranging from supply of arms and clothes, to scholarships and training opportunities offered to thousands of our cadres over the years.

The ANC and SACP Alliance

The usefulness of Shubin's book also lies in the fact that much as it is about the ANC, it is also about the SACP and its role in the liberation struggle, particularly during the years of exile and illegality. The book provides insights into the role of the SACP, perhaps in a manner that has not been covered before. There are facts that are brought into the public eye for the first time.

The SACP played an important facilitation role in the establishment of direct relations between the ANC and

the Soviet Union in the early 1960s. What comes through Shubin's account is the dedicated, unselfish and deeply loyal commitment to the ANC shown by the SACP leadership, particularly Moses Kotane and Yusuf Dadoo, in facilitating these contacts. The SACP never sought to use this relationship and its role in it to manipulate the ANC, or to gain individual positions of influence within the ANC itself.

Shubin's book, in a frank and open way, also covers the maturing relationship between the SACP and the ANC over the years, including the ups and downs and dilemmas of the Alliance. One of the difficult dilemmas facing the SACP, in the first decade of ANC in the underground, was the redefinition of its role in the context of a struggle led by the ANC, in a period requiring maximum unity and a single political centre and authority. It was a question of reconstituting the Party in exile, without at the same time creating dual allegiances in the liberation movement.

There was a running debate centred around the reluctance of some of the Party leaders, including Moses Kotane, to reconstitute Party structures, fearing that this might cause tensions within the ANC. Indeed Cde OR Tambo himself was initially very reluctant, not because of any opposition to the Party, but because, as quoted by Shubin, it would mean having to: “identify people (whether they are communists or not) which I hated to have to do. I say we had to start thinking in terms of ANC and Party and one had stopped thinking in these terms for a whole decade” (pp.119-120).

Another viewpoint on the same question is aptly captured by Chris Hani in an interview he did with Sonia Bunting in Botswana in May 1974, and which is also quoted here: “After coming out of prison [in Botswana after the 1967 Wankie campaign] I made a serious attempt to organise party life. I saw Moses was keen on preserving the cohesion of the national liberation movement. He realised there were enemies and he felt the Party should never give them the excuse to destroy the good working relations between the two organisations [the ANC and the SACP]... In a way he succeeded, he achieved the respect of OR (Oliver Tambo) and indirectly OR's recognition of the Party is mirrored in Moses. But Moses went too far.” (p.112)

“... this book clearly underlines that the Soviet Union and, in particular, the CPSU stood firmly behind and gave unconditional support to the ANC throughout the 30 years of its illegality.”

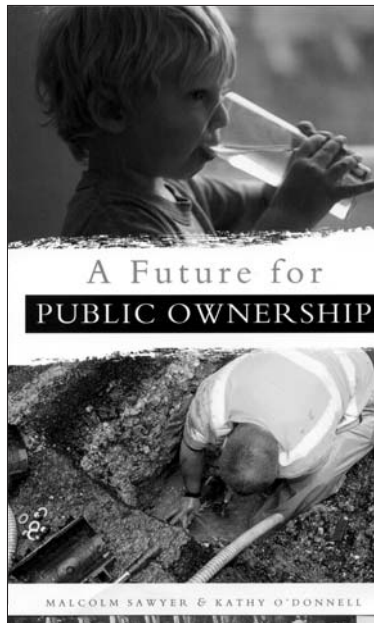


Joe Slovo is also quoted from 1973, voicing a similar perspective: "Moses (Kotane) of all Communists I have known could not be described as a stereotype... whereas a lot of us could in a general way go in for more or less profound theoretical analysis, in the last resort it was Moses who was the sort of link, not only with the ordinary people but with the organised national movement, particularly the ANC... [he had] this overriding desire to maintain the cohesion and unity of the national movement, his conduct in furtherance of that approach, furtherance of that tactic, objectively speaking presented at that period actually a very big danger to the historical survival of the Party." (p.112/3)

Shubin's account of the state of the Party almost 15 years after the banning of the ANC indicates a serious absence of independent structures at the time. Clearly the SACP went through a very difficult period, almost to the point of being liquidated. The later acceptance of the Party to re-establish its structures, as Shubin says, "brought about cohesion rather than division in the ranks of the ANC. For example, a number of communists worked in the ANC camps as commissars or political instructors, such as the Party veteran Professor Jack Simons, and did their best to educate the youth – new recruits from South Africa – as loyal members of the ANC" (p.120).

Indeed the relationship between the SACP and the ANC as captured in Shubin's book, provides many insights into the history of this relationship and the politics of our revolutionary alliance, particularly the challenge of combining tactical flexibility without sacrificing the independence and vanguard role of the Party. At the same time it is the challenge of not freezing the independence of the Party, such that we lose sight of our tactical objectives.

Of course some of our cadres, particularly those who have been an inseparable part of this history as told in Shubin's book might quibble with this or that aspect of the book. History is always a contested terrain. But what is incontestable is that this book is a major historical resource and record of the South African revolution. It is easy to read, written in a very simple and jargon-free language without losing its analytical depth. It is a book that every cadre of our movement must read. ★



Regulation, control and ownership

A Future for Public Ownership

Malcolm Sawyer and Kathy O'Donnell
Lawrence and Wishart, 1999,
ISBN 0 85315 885
£7, pp 115, 1

REVIEWED BY JOHN FOSTER

THIS SMALL book supplies important ammunition in the fight against privatisation. Its publication is sponsored by UNISON and results from the decision of the union's 1996 conference to examine "in detail" how privatised utilities can be returned to the public sector.

Professor Sawyer and Dr O'Donnell provide this detail. They tackle the two key questions: why utilities should be in the public sector and how this can now be achieved.

Using the recent research by Leslie Hannah and Richard Millward, they are able to refute assertions from the Thatcher era that public ownership is inherently inefficient. On the contrary, in Britain for the three decades after 1945 it seems to have done somewhat better than privately owned industry.

Taking nationalised industries as a whole for this period, they made more productive use of both labour and capital than manufacturing. Unlike British manufacturing, they improved

their productivity compared to that of American industry as a whole, and, making direct comparison with privately-owned American utilities in the same area, had higher levels of productivity.

Evidence from the post-privatisation period is more mixed. A number of the privatised utilities did improve their productivity – although only if you discount the heavy social costs of redundancy and often of poorer services. But, even so, some firms still recorded lower productivity after privatisation – including British Steel, Rolls Royce, Jaguar and British Airports.

The authors stress that regulation can be no substitute for democratic control. There are inherent difficulties when dealing with privatised firms which provide essential services, which often receive continuing public subsidy and which are sometimes monopoly suppliers. The regulators are notoriously susceptible to capture by the agenda of the provider companies. There is no possibility of strategic government planning when the companies run as commercial concerns. Even tough regulation can have unpredictable consequences. Heavy penalties for unpunctuality on the railways have been tragically associated with the neglect of health and safety.

How, then, can such firms be returned to the public sector? Surprisingly simply. The authors note that these privatised firms are all revenue earning. In buying them back the state would be gaining productive assets. Because the state can borrow cheaply, it could issue interest-bearing bonds to the shareholders and still leave the state better off in terms of annual income.

There has to be one point of criticism. The authors ask whether re-nationalisation would bring the state into conflict with its treaty obligations to the European Union. They say no. But is this so? The European Commission is currently pushing hard for member states with large public sectors to deregulate and privatise. They are actively using competition law and the single currency convergence terms to do so.

The Labour Movement needs to be aware that the strongest allies of the privatisation lobby live in Brussels. ★



Useful websites

Communist Party of Britain and Young Communist League

<http://www.communist-party.org.uk>

Morning Star socialist daily newspaper

<http://www.poptel.org.uk/morning-star/>

Searchlight anti-fascist magazine

<http://www.s-light.demon.co.uk/>

Trades Union Congress

<http://www.tuc.org.uk/>

International Centre for Trade Union Rights

<http://www.icturlabourmet.org>

Cuba Solidarity Campaign

<http://www.poptel.org.uk/cuba-solidarity/>



A benefit CD in aid of the Morning Star

Includes tracks from Blyth Power, Robert Wyatt, Leon Rosselson, Alistair Hulett, WOB, Roy Bailey, Spizz Energi, The Indestructible Beat, L.L., Red Alert, Red London, D.M.S., TV Smith, Dave Brown, The Mekons, The Angelic Upstarts, Robb Johnson, Barb Jungr, Attila teh Stockbroker, Stephen Wells.

Send £10 to Red Planet Records, Unit F11, Cape House, 787 Commercial Road, London E14 7HG

red

planet
BOOKS

Mail order books on politics, culture, history, socialism and society
For the latest catalogue and other enquiries contact Emily, Red Planet Books, Unit F11, Cape House, 787 Commercial Road, London E14 7HG

GRANTS NOT LOANS



Morning Star

Daily paper of the left
50p from your newsagent