



COMMUNIST REVIEW

- **Sitaram Yechury** On Transitional Governments
- **Roger Fletcher** Twenty-First Century Vision, Part 2
- **Prabhat Patnaik** Notes on Contemporary Imperialism
- **Jimmy Jancovich** The Crisis and the Regression of Our Time
- **Mike Quille** Soul Food



Transitional Governments



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Inset cover image of Sitaram Yechury from wikipedia by Fotokannan

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editorial



By Martin Levy

WHEN OUR previous number, *CR59*, appeared in February, it was already behind schedule, and a number of factors have conspired to delay this issue further – hence the jump from “winter” to “spring/summer” in our page header. Subscribers should not however be alarmed: we still plan to publish 4 issues this year, albeit they will be slightly out of synchrony with the seasons.

These are stirring times on the left and in the labour movement, given the Con-Dem government’s massive onslaught on public services. There is a myriad of struggles to fight, and too few activists to lead them, so that tough choices often have to be made – Which battles can we win? Where can our efforts best be focused?

The massive TUC demonstration on March 26, with its 500,000-750,000 participants, has inspired many to get involved. It was certainly one of the biggest trade union-led demonstrations ever. But demonstrations alone will not bring about a change of policies nor even force a change of government. Indeed, the lesson of the peace movement is that people get ‘tired’ of repeated demonstrations, and governments simply sit them out.

If the movement is to be successful in defeating government policies, then March 26 has to be followed by coordinated national strike action, first in the public sector and then across the whole trade union movement. Strikes not only build confidence and class consciousness; they also apply economic pressure and serve notice on employers, and in this case on the government also, that workers will not be ‘cattle led to the slaughter’. Furthermore, strikes change the balance of public debate and are an essential component of building hegemony in society for the alternative perspective of the labour movement.

The stage is being set for some coordinated industrial action on public sector pensions. UCU has already struck for one day, and now PCS, NUT, ATL and NAHT have decided to ballot. Other unions need to do likewise, since all public sector workers are facing massive detrimental changes to their pension schemes. With unity, this is an issue on which trade unions

can win, and that would open up the possibility of victories on other fronts as well.

However, strike action alone will not be enough to make victories secure, nor to prevent the movement being diverted into accepting Tory policies – albeit in a milder form – from an incoming Labour government. Alongside militancy and class consciousness, political consciousness needs to be built, and that is another job for activists on the left. Projecting alternatives such as the People’s Charter is essential; but left activists – if they are to be effective – need to refresh and deepen their understanding of Marxist theory.

We therefore make no apology for publishing, as lead article in this issue, an analysis of “transitional governments” from Sitaram Yechury, international secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). In Britain, we may seem a long way from achieving the transition to socialism, but we need to have the vision of what that might mean, and we can learn much from the experiences of the USSR during the years of building socialism, and from “transitional governments” today in Latin America, South Africa, and the 3 Left Front-led Indian states. As Sitaram points out, the nature of the transition differs, but the common feature is *keeping the politics in command*. This would be particularly important in Britain for any government committed to the People’s Charter or to a more comprehensive Left Wing Programme, as advocated by the Communist Party of Britain (CPB).

The current issue of *CR* also features Part 2 of Roger Fletcher’s *Twenty-First Century Vision*, where he draws useful parallels between how the eye/brain system works to enable us to see physically, and how many of us “see” politically. The brain converts two different inverted images, on separate eyes (parallax), into a 3-D representation of the real world;

whereas, he argues, a more accurate political view of the world “demands two different viewpoints, not the single one gratuitously provided for us by the ruling strata of a class-divided society.”

A second contribution from our Indian comrades is Prabhat Patnaik’s *Notes on Contemporary Imperialism*. This continues the theme of ‘anti-imperialism’ which was the main feature of *CR58*, and Prabhat argues cogently that the present, third, stage of imperialism is “marked by the hegemony of international finance capital”, which he describes as being “composed of finance capitals of different national origins, including from Third World countries, ... mov[ing] around the entire globe pursuing its own interest, and no particular national capitalist interest.” On this, there is a comradely difference of opinion between the CPB and the CPI(M), but the depth of Prabhat’s analysis does merit inclusion here, so that a well-informed debate can be conducted. Contributions are welcome.

A couple of articles in *CR59* have drawn discussion contributions which we publish in this issue. John Foster, Tom Burr and your humble editor venture comments on the draft new version of the CPB programme, *Britain’s Road to Socialism*; while Ken Fuller’s *Machismo, not Marxism – a Second Look at Che* has brought a short article and a Letter to the Editor in response. The Letter claims that publication of Ken’s piece was “a disgrace in a theoretical journal”, whereas the article is more measured. The undersigned has written about Che in the past in *CR*, and Ken’s article was accepted in the interests of informed debate.

This issue of the journal is completed by: Jimmy Jancovich, commenting on parallels and differences between 19th century politics and those of today; a celebration of the life of Pakistani poet and communist Faiz Ahmed Faiz, on the centenary of his birth; and our regular *Soul Food* column, which this time focuses on Chartist poetry.

■ *Communist Review* welcomes submission of articles (normally up to 5000 words), discussion contributions and letters – send to editor@communistreview.org.uk. Articles will be reviewed by members of the Editorial Board, and we reserve the right not to publish.

On Transitional Governments

By Sitaram Yechury



The 3rd International Congress on Kerala Studies took place on 1-3 January 2011, at Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum), the capital of the Indian state of Kerala, which has had a Left Democratic Front government since 2006, although a first Communist government was elected in 1957. Participating in the concluding session, on transitional governments, were Dr Carlos Alzugaray Treto (University of Havana, Cuba), Fuad Cassim (Adviser to Finance Minister, Republic of South Africa), Milena Santana-Ramirez (Venezuelan Ambassador to India), Fredrik Laurin (Journalist, Sweden) Prof Prabhat Patnaik (Deputy Chairman, Kerala Planning Commission) and Sitaram Yechury, International Secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). We reproduce Comrade Yechury's intervention here.

I: Introduction

It is, indeed, appropriate that this discussion on transitional governments is taking place in Kerala, which produced the first democratically-elected Communist state government in a country pursuing a capitalist path of development under the bourgeois-landlord class rule led by the big bourgeoisie.

The term 'transitional governments', in my opinion, is unscientific and, therefore, unsatisfactory. In the CPI(M) Programme, we describe the Left-led state governments as "governments of a transitional character". This is because there can be various types of transition – there is a transition from capitalism to socialism, there is a transition in the nature of opposition to imperialism etc – as can be seen in Latin America today. As we shall see, all such governments are products of

class struggle that is taking place within the concrete conditions of individual countries.

Broadly speaking, we can identify, among others, four different types of transition which have thrown up governments as a consequence of popular struggles:

- (a) the transition towards building socialism following a triumphant revolution, like Russia in Lenin's time or, in a completely different context, Cuba today;
- (b) governments that have emerged through massive popular struggles against imperialism and its neoliberal economic offensive, as in various countries in Latin America;
- (c) a government that emerged after a heroic and a long-drawn national

democratic revolution defeating the apartheid regime in South Africa; and

- (d) Left-led state governments in India working within the constraints of a bourgeois-landlord constitution.

Needless to say, the character, functioning, policies and programmes adopted by these different categories of government would, naturally, be different.

The policies and programmes implemented by these governments, however, to a large extent determine their success in achieving the transition that they have set out to do. It must always be borne in mind that a period of transition is, by definition, a period of intense class struggle when those who seek to advance and those who seek to regress this transition

come into sharp conflict.

The success of achieving the declared objectives of such a transition by the Left progressive parties leading such governments, in the final analysis, depends crucially on whether these governments succeed in keeping politics in command; *ie* it is the political objective which determines the content of economic policy and not the other way around – which is the neoliberal prescription of what the economy needs (read 'maximising profits') that will determine its politics.

II: Keeping Politics in Command

Soon after the Russian revolution, Lenin advanced his New Economic Policy (NEP) as the basis for the transition towards building the socialist economic foundations in order to consolidate socialism.



Congress on Kerala Studies

Lenin himself noted, on the 4th anniversary of the October Revolution:

“Borne along on the crest of the wave of enthusiasm, rousing first the political enthusiasm and then the military enthusiasm of the people, we expected to accomplish economic tasks just as great as the political and military tasks we had accomplished by relying directly on this enthusiasm. We expected – or perhaps it would be truer to say that we presumed without having given it adequate consideration – to be able to organise the state production and the state distribution of products on communist lines in a small-peasant country

directly as ordered by the proletarian state. Experience has proved that we were wrong. It appears that a number of transitional stages were necessary – state capitalism and socialism – in order to *prepare* – to prepare by many years of effort – for the transition to Communism. Not directly relying on enthusiasm, but aided by the enthusiasm engendered by the great revolution, and on the basis of personal interest, personal incentive and business principles, we must first set to work in this small-peasant country *to build solid gangways to socialism by way of state capitalism*. Otherwise we shall never get to

Communism, we shall never bring scores of millions of people to Communism. That is what experience, the objective course of the development of the revolution, has taught us.”¹

But, does this mean the restoration of capitalism? To this Lenin answered quite candidly during the period of the NEP that:

“It means that, to a certain extent, we are recreating capitalism. We are doing this quite openly. It is state capitalism. But state capitalism in a society where power belongs to capital, and state capitalism in a proletarian state, are two different concepts. In a capitalist state,

state capitalism means that it is recognised by the state and controlled by it for the benefit of the bourgeoisie, and to the detriment of the proletariat. In the proletarian state, the same thing is done for the benefit of the working class, for the purpose of withstanding the as yet strong bourgeoisie, and of fighting it. It goes without saying that we must grant concessions to the foreign bourgeoisie, to foreign capital. Without the slightest denationalisation, we shall lease mines, forests and oilfields to foreign capitalists, and receive in exchange manufactured goods, machinery etc, and thus restore our own industry.”²



Characterising the process of building state capitalism as a war, Lenin says:

“The issue in the present war is – who will win, who will first take advantage of the situation: the capitalist, whom we are allowing to come in by the door, and even by several doors (and by many doors we are not aware of, and which open without us, and in spite of us) or proletarian state power?”³

He proceeds further to state:

“We must face this issue squarely – who will come out on top? Either the capitalists succeed in organising first – in which case they will drive out the Communists and that will be the end of it. Or the proletarian state power, with the support of the peasantry, will prove capable of keeping a proper rein on those gentlemen, the capitalists, so as to direct capitalism along state channels and to create a capitalism that will be subordinate to the state and serve the state.”⁴

It is precisely this understanding that reflects the firmness of keeping politics in command. The subsequent developments, both international and domestic, however, did not permit the Soviet Union necessary time and space for the transition to take place in the circumstances outlined by Lenin. Encirclement of the Soviet Union, the civil war, the preparations for the Second World War by the fascist forces did not allow the Soviet Union a peaceful period necessary for a protracted period of transition towards the consolidation of socialist

Table 1: Venezuela – Economic and Social Indicators⁶

Category	Year	% or other measure	Year	% or other measure
Poverty (individuals)	1998	52%	2008	31.5%
Extreme Poverty	1998	20.1%	2008	9.5%
Gini Index [†]	1998	0.48	2008	0.41
Infant Mortality/100,000	1998	21.4	2006	14
Nutrition-related Deaths/100,000	1998	4.9	2007	2.3
Access to Clean Water	1998	80%	2007	92%
Access to Sanitation	1998	62%	2007	82%
Social Security, % of Population	1998	1.7%	2008	4.4%
Unemployment rate	1998	11.3%	2008	7.8%

Note: The end year is the last year where data were available, in most cases 2007 or 2008.

[†] Measure of inequality: 0 = total equality; 1 = total inequality.

productive forces. The pace of the socialisation of the means of production had to be hastened for the very survival of the socialism itself. The fact that the Soviet Union did succeed in socialising the means of production through ‘collectivisation’, bore the brunt of fascist assaults during the Second World War, and decisively defeated those assaults, will go down as one of the most remarkable and liberating experiences of the 20th century.

The success of the countries in the process of post-capitalist transition depends crucially on keeping such politics in command while determining the economic policies.

III: Transition in Latin America

The emergence of popular governments riding the wave of massive popular upsurge against imperialism and its neoliberal offensive in Latin America has been popularly described as a ‘pink tide – turn to the Left’. In 2005, the BBC reported that three out of every four people living in South America lived in countries ruled by “left-leaning presidents”.⁵ This, according to the BBC, was both a reflection and a consequence of a clean break with the ‘Washington consensus’.

Many countries in Latin America are ruled by either left-wing governments or

progressive governments. For the past few years, they have drastically reduced their economic dependence on the US and increased trade amongst the countries of the South. This in a way limited the effects of the economic crisis on the continent and helped them recover fast. Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia are nationalising various public assets that were placed under private control by the earlier regimes. Many banks were nationalised by Venezuela, and Ecuador has recently nationalised its energy resources, as Bolivia had done earlier. With their increased emphasis on social spending, and the state playing a major role in the alleviation of socio-economic inequalities, these countries are leading the way for other governments.

Various forums – like MERCOSUR, ALBA, OAS etc – have been established to encourage regional trade between the countries of the continent. All these forums are being used not only to forge close bonds between these countries but also to put up a united face in resisting US pressure. The United States is trying hard to regain its lost hold on the continent which it once famously considered to be its back yard and is increasing its military presence in the area. Seven new military bases have been set up in Colombia, one of the few countries that is still

politically close to the USA. Using the earthquake in Haiti as a pretext, the US virtually put that country under its military control. The role played by the US in the coup in Honduras and the subsequent sham elections there is well known. The progressive governments in the region and the Left-wing forces in the continent are deeply engaged in the fight against the US, exposing its nefarious designs and mobilising the people against the imperialist offensive.

For the purpose of illustration, let us take the experience of Venezuela over the last decade. As can be seen from the accompanying table,⁶ there has been substantial improvement in social indicators since 1998. Poverty and income inequality have declined sharply. Indicators of health and access to education have substantially improved as have access to water and sanitation. The number of students in higher education more than doubled from the 1999-2000 school year to the 2007-2008 school year (see Table 1).

However, today the economy of Venezuela is still a capitalist-dominated economy although definitely not a neoliberal one. There are three different types of production and social relation: the private, state and social economy sectors. The largest is the private sector, meaning that it



The 7th summit meeting of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) ended 17 October 2010, in Cochabamba, with the decision to establish a virtual currency.

is primarily organised with the goal of maximising profits and that the capitals – money structures, equipment and inventory – are privately owned. This capitalist sector comprises about 2/3 of the economy. It is integrally linked with transnational capital either through imports of their consumer- and capital-goods and/or with transnational corporations having subsidiaries in Venezuela.

The second major sector is the state sector – enterprises that are owned by the state and whose employees are public employees. This public sector includes PDVSA, the huge state-owned oil company. Although much of the revenue of PDVSA now goes directly or indirectly to fund health and education programs, to build housing and infrastructure, it is run in a top-down and hierarchical manner with large wage- and salary-differences among its employees. Wages are also much higher than the national average. There is little worker self-management in most of the state sector. This sector produces about 30% of

Venezuela's output, a proportion similar to its share in 1998.

The third sector is the social economy. This includes what are often called socialist enterprises, such as farms that are publicly owned and self-managed. This sector includes cooperatives and firms that are jointly run and owned by the workers and the state. This social economy is only about 2% of the economy.

The Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America, popularly known as ALBA, has emerged as a political project that is directly opposed to the imperialist design of a Free Trade Agreement for the Americas (FTAA). Although it was born as an alternative proposal to the FTAA, ALBA responds to an old and permanent confrontation between Latin American and Caribbean peoples and imperialism. Perhaps a better way of presenting the conflicting projects is by contrasting Monroism and Bolivarianism. Monroism, usually referred to as 'America for the Americans', is in reality 'America for the North

Americans'. This is the imperialist project, a project of looting and pillage. Bolivarianism is a proposal of unity between Latin American and Caribbean peoples, following the ideals of Simon Bolívar, who intended to create a Confederation of Republics. It was, in sum, the opposition to the imperialist proposal by a proposal of liberation, reflecting the contrast between the FTAA and ALBA.

As Fernando Ramon Bossi, Organisational Secretary of the Bolivarian People's Congress of Venezuela said:

"ALBA must be a political tool for liberation. Like any other tool, it must be efficient and flexible in the face of changing circumstances. Why do we mention this? We believe that ALBA will have to act as a retaining wall against the new tactics that imperialism will use to dominate us. For example, we have seen how many 'little FTAA's' appeared once the attempt to impose

the FTAA failed, indirectly forcing the region to accept this commercial proposition.

"The United States government hopes to take advantage of the slightest weakness shown by Latin Americans and Caribbeans. If they sense dissension, they will try to put us against each other to defeat us later.

"We, the peoples of ALBA, the peoples of the Americas, supported by our progressive governments and popular organisations, will refuse to accept the new colonialist imposition - one or many 'little FTAA's'. On the contrary, they will be faced with our ALBA and 'little ALBA's'. Every one of the agreements signed within the framework of ALBA will be like a solid brick that will help construct a Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Republics. This is the current responsibility of the popular forces of integration."⁷

The success of such governments of transitional character in Latin America, therefore, depends on how firmly they exercise and maintain 'politics in command'.

IV: South Africa

Following the historic and heroic victory over apartheid, and the victory of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) government based on a tripartite alliance – the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) – was seriously engaged in transforming the highly exploitative and discriminatory apartheid



structures and in providing the predominantly Black population with economic empowerment. Initially, it tried this through a policy known as GEAR – growth, employment and redistribution – adopted in 1996. However, it was later realised that the workers' share in gross domestic product (GDP), which had stood at 51% in 1994, declined to 42% in 2008; and the share of profits as a percentage of GDP went up from 25% to 33% in the same period. South Africa is now in the midst of effecting a serious course correction.

The following extracts from a resolution of the SACP will clarify the nature of the ongoing struggle:⁸

“The economic policies pursued were characterised by rapid opening up and liberalisation through drastic tariff reductions and the dropping of exchange controls. Impressing foreign investors became more important than developing a national industrial policy. In spite of terming the economic policies as Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, formal employment continued to decline and the country's wealth remained unevenly distributed along racial lines. Although economic

growth has improved, GEAR, with its focus on stringent monetary and fiscal targets, failed in the goal of growth based on job creation, meeting people's needs, poverty reduction and a more equitable distribution of wealth.

“The market, rather than popular mobilisation and engagement, was to be the new motive force of change. The invisible hand of millions of willing-sellers and willing-buyers would drive change. A new technocratic elite that ‘managed’ the capitalist economy, rather than grass-roots activists, became the new leading cadre of the ANC. And the key alliance was no longer the Tripartite, but the compact between established white capital and an emerging, ANC-aligned black capitalist stratum.”

The SACP calls these disastrous economic policies, which fundamentally differ from the Freedom Charter, the “1996 Project”. They have termed this a result of

“a class alliance between sections of global and domestic capital, a certain cadre in the state, together with the emergent sections of

the black bourgeoisie. This project has been highly dependent, for its success, on the control of the ANC and the state in order to achieve its objectives. To achieve its aim, the 1996 project had also sought to marginalise allies, and often the ANC itself from key strategic policy decisions by government. This was an attempt by the capitalist class to stamp their authority on the post-colonial state and pursue policies suited to their interest.

“To carry out this project substantial changes were necessary in the functioning of the government and the ANC. It required an aloof, behind-close-doors style as opposed to the democratic traditions of the ANC. The ANC had to be converted into a ‘ruling party’ from a broad platform providing space to all the sections committed to the Freedom Charter. So also was there the need to blunt its capacity to mobilise and conduct movements on people's causes. All this led to the demobilisation of the ANC, a dysfunctional Alliance, serious divisions within organisations and a movement enmeshed

in corruption, scandals and factionalism based not on ideology, but on spats over tenders and deals.”

This project pursued by a section of the leadership of the ANC and the government created discontent among the people and the members of the ANC, not to speak of its trusted allies – the SACP and COSATU. They began to register their dissent and resist these attempts that were regarded as a blow to the NDR. The working class took its ideological and mass offensive to where it mattered most, in the local and mass structures of the alliance, while not abandoning its independence and its own campaigns. All this resulted in the eruption of dissatisfaction at the ANC's 2005 National General Council, and subsequently at the 52nd Conference in Polokwane in December 2007 – which marked a significant revolt by the ANC grass-roots membership against the 1996 class project.

At Polokwane the incumbent president Thabo Mbeki was defeated in the organisational polls by Jacob Zuma. This Conference was in many ways a truly historic conference. Apart from demonstrating the best of the ANC's democratic traditions in practice, it was also marked by a radical change in its leadership and it adopted many progressive policies recommended by its mid-2007 policy conference. Polokwane marked the severe dislodging, albeit not total defeat, of the 1996 project inside the ANC. It also marked another failed attempt of the capitalist class to break the alliance between the ANC, SACP and COSATU and wean away the ANC from the path of the NDR and the promises made in the Freedom Charter. In fact it had been commented that the ANC needed a Polokwane ‘to consolidate and deepen a radical national



democratic revolution’.

Once again, the success of the transition of South Africa to consolidate the national democratic revolution crucially depends on its ability to keep politics in command. The SACP has come to the conclusion that this success can only come under working class hegemony. It says: “The struggle for working class hegemony is not an alternative to the multi-class character of our national democratic struggle – on the contrary, it is the precondition for its successful advance, consolidation and defence.”

V: Left Front Governments in India

The Left Front (LF) governments in India belong to an entirely different character, as noted above. On the basis of our strategic understanding, the success of the people’s democratic revolution requires the forging and strengthening of the people’s democratic front (PDF). This is a front of classes and not political parties. In order to achieve the PDF, there may be various intermediate stages, including the formation of Left Democratic Fronts with other political parties. This process may bring into existence the possibilities of forming governments in some states. The CPI(M) Programme in 1964 had stated that: “The Party will utilise all the opportunities that present themselves of bringing into existence governments pledged to carry out a modest programme of giving relief to the people. The formation of such governments will give more fillip to the revolutionary movement” While tendering our *bona fides* to the people and sharing the differences with bourgeois parties, these government should serve as instruments of struggle “to win more and more people and more and more allies for the cause of people’s democracy and at a later stage, socialism”.

The updated Programme (2000), in the light of the experience of the governments in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, stated that such governments must “carry out a programme of providing relief to the people and strive to project and implement alternative policies within the existing limitations”.

On the basis of this understanding, at our 18th Congress in 2005, the Party adopted a document on *Certain Policy Matters* that defined the LF governments’ approach to certain crucial issues thrown up by globalisation and neoliberal economic policies. It clarified many policy matters connected with the objective “to project and implement alternative policies within the existing limitations”. The 19th Congress has further expanded this in its political-organisational report, *On the Role and Functioning of the LF Governments*. Since these are all well known and discussed in Kerala, I am not repeating them.

Without going into the details of the functioning of these governments, much of which has already been covered during these days, it must be noted that with reference to the four foundational pillars of the Indian Constitution, the performance and contribution of these governments has been distinct from other bourgeois governments. The implementation of land reforms meant the economic empowerment of 10s of millions of people – the most exploited and oppressed people. The establishment of grass root democratic institutions and structures (*panchayati raj*)⁹ began in West Bengal a full eleven years before Rajiv Gandhi¹⁰ amended the Constitution to this effect) and the Kerala experience of decentralisation through the *People’s Plan* has pioneered ways to deepen democracy and decision making at the grass roots.

The role of these Left-led governments has been exemplary and serves as a

beacon in upholding and strengthening secularism in our country and meeting the onslaught of communal forces. It is not a matter of coincidence that the BJP¹¹ cannot muster to win a single MP or an MLA¹² on its own in any of these three states.

Likewise, these governments have played and continue to play a pivotal role in safeguarding the federal principles of the Indian Union by seeking the strengthening of Centre-state relations when the Centre is constantly seeking to erode the autonomy of the state governments through efforts to impose a unitary structure.

Thus, on all these counts – economic empowerment of people; strengthening and deepening democracy; safeguarding and strengthening secular democracy; upholding federalism and advancing social justice – these Left-led governments have become both instruments of struggle and implementers of alternative policies that provide greater relief to the people.

It is precisely for this reason that there is a concerted attack against the Left by the rainbow coalition of all reactionary forces. The Left’s hallmark in contemporary politics is its firm anti-imperialist positions.

It is this concerted onslaught against the Left, principally targeting the Left-led governments in Bengal and Kerala, that constitutes the current neo-liberal reactionary onslaught on the Left. These challenges have been met in the past and will continue to be met today by *keeping our politics in command*.

During this period of the global crisis, people will be looking for alternatives to the neoliberal onslaught of attacks on their livelihoods and rights. As Lenin pointed out, crisis provides the possibility for a revolutionary situation; but he also cautioned that revolutionary situations will not lead to a revolution unless the subjective factors develop the necessary strength to utilise this situation properly. It is in this background that the role of these governments that we have discussed assumes greater significance.

Let me conclude by repeating what I have stated earlier: in the final analysis, the success of these governments in advancing the specific transition that they are engaged with will crucially depend on how successfully they are able to meet and defeat the imperialist-backed reactionary offensive against them.

Notes and References

- 1 V I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 33, p 58; emphasis added –SY.
- 2 V I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 32, p 491.
- 3 V I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 33, p 65.
- 4 *Ibid*, p 66.
- 5 See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4311957.stm>.
- 6 P Böhmer *Venezuela: Socialism for the 21st Century*, ZNET, 3 August 2009; at <http://www.zcommunications.org/venezuela-socialism-for-the-21st-century-by-peter-bohmer>.
- 7 F Bossi, *Constructing the ALBA from within the Peoples*, speech at the 3rd Summit of the Peoples, Mar del Plata, Argentina, 3 November 2005; see <http://www.alianzabolivariana.org/modulos.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=1980>.
- 8 The actual resolution to which Comrade Yechury is referring is not clear. However, aspects are reproduced in B Nzimande, *The Revolution is on Trial* (7), at *Umsebenzi Online*, Vol 6, 5 December 2007, <http://www.sacp.org.za/main.php?include=pubs/umsebenzi/2007/vol6-22.html>, and B Nzimande, *Speech to the NUMSA Conference*, 14 October 2008, at <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=106481&sn=Detail> –Ed.
- 9 System of rural local government in India, with 3 ascending tiers –Ed.
- 10 Leader of the Congress Party and sixth Prime Minister of India, assassinated 21 May 1991 by the Tamil Tigers –Ed.
- 11 Bharatiya Janata Party, Hindu nationalist party in India –Ed.
- 12 MLA = Member of the Legislative Assembly of an Indian state –Ed.

Twenty-First Century Vision



Part II: Do My Eyes Deceive Me?

By Roger Fletcher

Introduction

From the first part of this article (CR59, Winter 2011, pp 10-15) you may have reached the disturbing, but ultimately correct, conclusion that our perceived world is actually totally inverted. Here we take a closer look at our major sense of sight, to find that it fully complements that conclusion.

We work from the radicalism of Descartes [1596-1650] through to the latest understandings of our visual eye/brain¹ system. In so doing, we will see that there are quite useful parallels between how all of us see physically, and how too many of us still 'see' politically.

I have chosen to depict the human visual system² (having worked in that field for many years) as a useful analogue of several socio-political constructs; both models have elements of comparable dubiety. A few unusual terms, and one anatomical diagram, are unavoidable here; transplanted from such disciplines as physics, neurology, mensuration and astronomy, their relevance will become evident within the text. Hopefully, by using these comparisons we can reconcile our political necessities more firmly with current empirical knowledge.



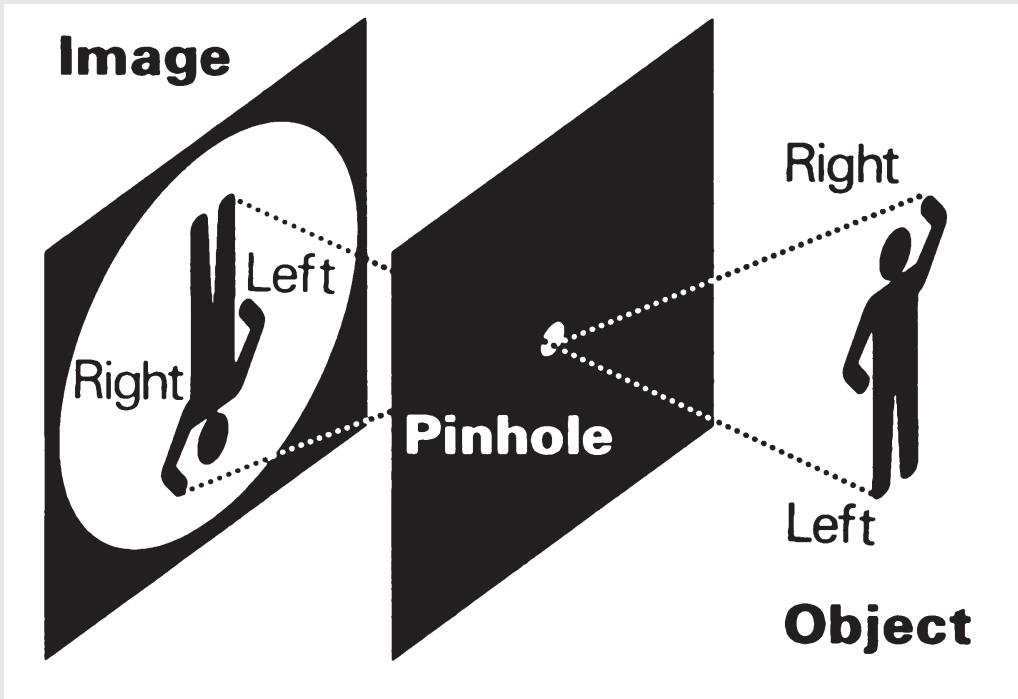


Fig 1. Basic optics of the mammalian/human eye, best shown as here, by reference to the pinhole camera (*camera obscura*). The left half of the figure depicts a blacked-out room, or box. The pinhole in one wall projects an image of the brightly lit object onto the opposite wall within the black box. Points to note are that: (a) because light – in Newtonian space – travels in straight lines, the image **must** be turned; and (b) this hemi-rotation of 180 degrees is only completed to a full revolution by our brain. In the camera, the image was initially captured on ground glass, and now more commonly is on film or digital receptor. In the eye, similarly a darkened chamber, the light-sensitive retina receives the image and digitally processes it in real time, both at the point of reception and in the more distal visual cortex. For more clarity refer to Fig 3 at end of this part.

Our Current State of Knowledge

As shown in Part I, capitalism has long tried to deny or ignore the importance and logic of “Three Guys named Charles”. Today there is a continuing avoidance of the implications of much current scientific understanding and research, unless those results have immediate commercial uses. As Berger points out, “such progress as is being made is made in pure science, where the discipline of the method forces researchers to jettison, at least whilst working, the *habitual prejudices* [my italics –RF] of the society they find themselves in.”³

Three Deceits

The answer to the title question, “Do my eyes deceive me?” must be an emphatic “Yes”, but it is a three-fold answer:

The **first** deception – for convenience we’ll call it rotation – is absolutely basic and, as we shall see, inbuilt through laws of physics and evolution. It results in the external world being imaged at the back of the eye (retina) both upside down and the wrong way round, and it remains so from beginning to end of our lives. Apart from being aware of this, and its implications, there is nothing that can be done about it; there is no escaping the laws of physics. From Fig 1 we can

understand, with much more ease via the *camera obscura*,⁴ what René Descartes discovered with great difficulty. He took an ox eye (the quadruped, not the daisy, *sic*) and scraped away the outer fibrous layer (white of the eye, or sclera) at the back of the eyeball, until a dim image on the retina was visible. In practice, this is a **very dim** image, and René would have had to shroud himself thoroughly to exclude any extraneous light from flooding his result.

Note particularly, for our fast-moving world, that this basic law of image formation applies both to simple orientation and to direction of movement. With this latter point in mind, we may be fairly confident whilst driving or cycling in traffic, because our brains have adjusted in infancy to the rotation. But in more mature life, we become inured to political media that present convincing news of ‘developments’ that soon turn out to be retrograde steps; decay is presented as progress; and the latest war is presented as a path to peace. Consider for a moment the debacle of Private Finance Initiatives in NHS hospital development, or ‘academies’ that will not teach well-established facts of evolution.

NB The rotation shown in Fig 1 is a function of the pinhole alone; **no lens is necessary**. Nor should that turning of the image be confused with the very different mechanism of mirror reversal, which was introduced in Part I under

‘Dodgson’.⁵ We shall meet mirror images again, in a very practical way, in Part III.

However, a few words of caution are needed here. Our visual system depends very much on a balanced view. Some revolutions in the past have failed catastrophically from trying to make society switch from a ‘rightist’ position to a ‘leftist’ one, and we’ll look at a major case – and partial solution – later. It is a change that is fraught with dangers but, as we examine our second deception, we might just glimpse some resolution of this thorny issue.

The problem of a **second** deception arises from having two eyes working in tandem, see Fig 2. Generally known as ‘parallax’,⁶ in physiological optics this mechanism is called stereopsis. Its most immediate and practical function for us is to add the third dimension to our mental images; and, in his recently published *The Mind’s Eye*,⁷ physician/neurologist Oliver Sacks describes the malfunctioning and restoration of this mechanism in one of his patients.

Normally, stereopsis enables us to gauge relative distances, speeds and trajectories, but it also facilitates a higher function, which we tend to lose sight of in class-divided society. That higher level is one of disputation or, as we might say in a different context, dialectics; for not only do our two eyes work in tandem, they are also the front-end sensors of a comparator system that extends from the



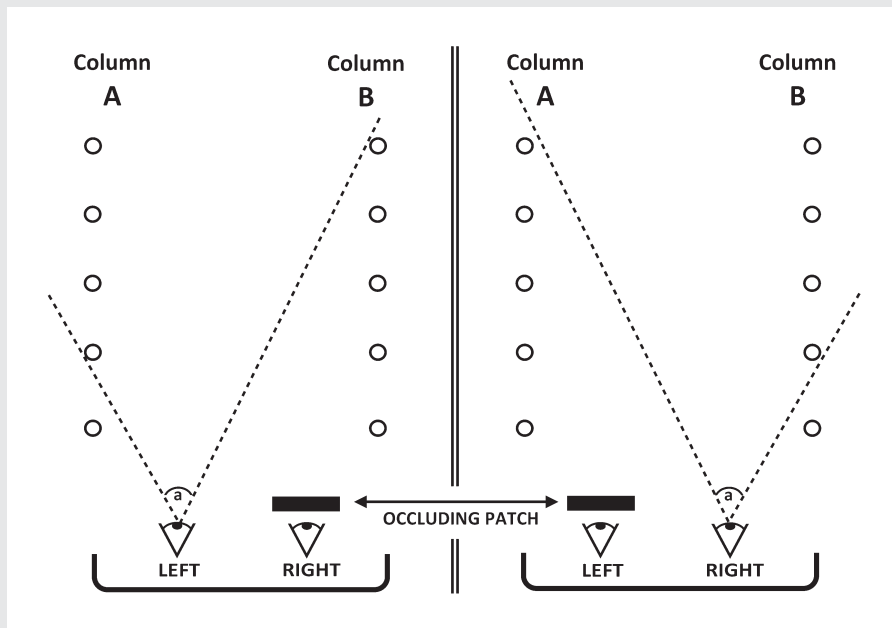


Fig 2. Simplest case of parallax. When either eye is covered, objects in columns A and B will appear in different positions, both in relation to their own column, and to the opposite column. Obviously these objects only **appear** to move, the differences being caused solely by our own changing viewpoint. Combining the data-packages from both eyes, as our visual system normally does, resolves the two into one depth-related package within the relevant brain region, ie the visual cortex shown in Fig 3.

eye to the rearmost area of the brain, see Fig 3. Our two eyes are not only complementary to, but are simultaneously in dialogue with, one another, and this 'conversation' is carried out via the 'central processing unit' (CPU) of the brain. This is the most likely explanation for those anomalous figures, or 'optical illusions', that fascinate many a child, and not a few adults; a static drawing will constantly 'flip' between two spatial interpretations.^{8,9,10}

[Worth noting here is the fact that in these examples artists, rather like professional politicians, have deliberately set out to create ambiguities. In the first case the aim is to delight, entertain, and possibly gently warn us, but in the second the intent is to confuse and misinform. It is rare indeed that there are more than two interpretations, corresponding to the two visual pathways and the right and left viewpoints. In everyday life a synthesis of the two, within the brain, is often a practical necessity!]

The **third** deceit almost wholly concerns processes in other areas of the brain, involving the specific language, grammar and syntax of the visual system. In some 'management courses' we are told, 'Don't ass-u-me, you'll make an ass of u and me'. Fair enough, but we all depend on some general assumptions: the sun will be there tomorrow; the road does continue beyond the hill-top. Individually we also build in to our

brains assumptions that are part cultural, part practical; parallel lines will appear to converge with distance, and walls usually meet at right-angles.

Some of the effects of our assumptions are mentioned in the following section, *Right versus Left*. For instance, if I say "pig", a listener is unlikely to visualise either a joint or rasher of bacon; and if the listener says "grape" I am unlikely to visualise either wine or champagne. We have developed specific words for specific states of matter, and for ideological concepts although, due to the ideological power of the ruling class, most people will still interchange the words communism and socialism. Many people used to talk of the 'drabness' of the socialist countries. During a 1977 trip to Cuba, I asked a fellow-tourist, a student from India, what she noticed about the streets of Havana. Her quick reply was that she was very conscious of not being insulted by every advertisement hoarding! I confess that I had been unaware of the lack of depictions of scantily clad females on wall posters; an instructive case of cultural bias, and of the pernicious osmosis that was introduced in Part I.

Right versus Left

The slightly less-patient reader may start to wonder where all this is going, in a leading Marxist theoretical journal. So, just as an appetiser, consider the previous paragraph and diagram, and the following syllogism:

We have established that our eyes rotate every external thing – up becomes down and, less obviously, left becomes right. Remember, this is a physical fact, not a game of political semantics, and the restoration of normality demands active involvement of the brain.

But we also know that right-wingers in politics are sure that they are right and we on the left are wrong.

Thus, if we remember that everything is reversed within our eyes, we can say with informed confidence that the minority 'right' are wrong ...and we on the 'left', are right!

This may sound facetious, until we recall two everyday examples of its operation. Firstly, as we move into a further period of class-confrontation, the *real* causes of strikes will be the very opposite of their portrayal in the ruling-class-owned newspapers, as shown in a recent letter to the *Morning Star*¹¹ and, naturally, in the daily tenor of that publication. And secondly, the power of our class, however highly skilled it may be, is routinely demeaned in those same ruling class newspapers, until we withdraw that power.

These two points will seem unremarkable within the pages of *Communist Review*, and there is accumulating scientific evidence that "the words you say, think and hear have a very real impact on the way you see".¹² The implications of such a conclusion are enormous, especially when we read the concluding line of Ings' stimulating book *The Eye, a Natural History*, and of "the dominant sense of the planet's dominant species – an animal who sees only what it wants to see".¹³

So far, so good. But psychologists and linguistics researchers, and many other varied workers, are now investigating cultural assumptions and reaching conclusions that are bound to have far-reaching consequences. For instance in a US study at Emory University one of the latest research tools, the fMRI scanner,¹⁴ has been used to investigate the 'political brain'. Thirty men, all with strong political opinions, were provocatively questioned whilst within the fMRI scanner. The research team leader is quoted as saying that "We did not see any increased activation of the parts of the brain normally engaged during reasoning."¹⁵

In a more recent study, reported in *New Scientist*,¹⁶ a team at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, found that 96% of the subjects used in psychological research projects come from western industrialised rich

democratic (WEIRD) societies. They conclude that such over-dependence on WEIRD experimental subjects has dramatically skewed our understanding of human cognition. The reporter goes on to explain how the effect of optical illusions, assumed to be universal, actually varies by 20% across culture.

Those examples, from Emory University and from Vancouver, show how much we are at the mercy of our senses, which are in turn “subject to the prejudices of the society we find ourselves in” as Berger was quoted in the opening paragraph.³ How do we cope with this very vexing, indeed dangerous, tendency? Let us just go back a little, and look at ...

... Our First Revolution.

One of our first acts as neonates is, surprisingly, a revolutionary one. Most of us enter the world head first, but all of us individually have to turn that world the right way up and the right way round, as soon as we open our eyes. This is the natural and essential response to the situation shown in Fig 1.

If we start with the external world, go to the retinal image, and then on to our by-now integrated mental reconstructions encoded within the visual storage and analysis region (cortex) of our brains, it becomes evident that we

have subjected the world, as imaged and quite subconsciously, to a full 360 degree revolution. For any reader who may think this all too well-understood to be worth repeating, we might recall the political truth that many humans remain disoriented throughout their lives.

To reconcile this inverted world with the real one is something that our brains have partly become ‘hard-wired’ to do as we have evolved, but part has to be learned in real-time. That accounts for the frowns of concentration on a baby’s forehead, as it handles and licks every accessible object and surface; it is reconciling direct physical contact of the material world with its own retinal and mental images. Some authorities consider that this visual reorienting continues at least into the second year of life; it is possibly the most complex learning process that we can contemplate, and an area of highly active and swiftly developing research.¹⁷

And if I appear to be playing games with the idea of ‘revolution’, there is a serious purpose. In Part I the complementary natures of revolution and evolution were emphasised by relating Darwin’s ideas to those of Marx; the aim of some to destroy both concepts was also introduced. An outline of the principles of our visual system, itself the

product of a long evolution, may help emphasise the deep interrelationship of elements in our culture that are more commonly counterposed.

So, having established the very basic mechanism, we need to look at some functional aspects of vision, and to dip briefly into established areas of physiology and neuroscience. We may thus see how much our current knowledge reinforces the idea of a presently ‘upside down’ world, and as a consequence strengthens the concepts – and need – for scientific socialism.

Vision as a System

The sense of sight is our most important one. The system as a whole consumes about half of our brain’s processing power and, with associated terms, deeply invests our language. Thus we ‘see’ what someone else means, we may be ‘blind’ to reason, or ‘blinded’ by prejudice, and we commonly attribute ‘colours’ to political viewpoints.

Sight also, quite evidently, depends on the medium of light for speed of transmission, and resolution of finer detail than any other senses. So there are good reasons for its evolutionary dominance. We may not have the visual acuity of a hawk, or the accurate distance judgement and night vision of a cat, or even the brief reaction times of those two, but we do have a system that is integrated with all our other senses and with our cultural and linguistic protocols. That is at once our great advantage and, for the time being at least, our ‘Achilles Heel’. So let us look a little closer at the ...

... Materialism of One Eye ...

“See the world as it really is” runs an advertisement for the latest high-definition television receiver, and our eye is often compared with a film or television camera. However, if we allow for the detailed and careful scripting, editing and time-base manipulation inherent in every film and television broadcast, and for the fact that our eyes are highly complex and interactive extensions of our brains, then we can see that both advertisement and comparison are only fractions of a truth. With the added, and adroitly applied, cult of censorship, television is a medium that generally shores up the hierarchical capitalist arrangement of current society.¹⁸

Here we have to be very careful. Eyes do a great deal of processing of the retinal image before feeding that partly-digested information along the neural pathways, ready for processing and assimilation at

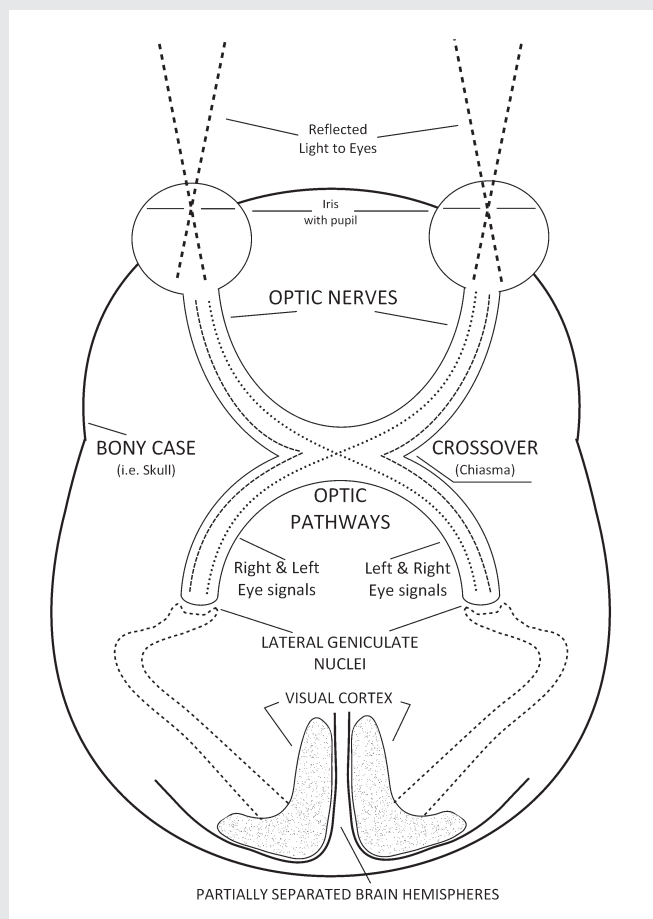


Fig 3. A simplified diagram of how two eyes are linked into one integrated system in humans and basically all other mammals. One or two structures are here only labelled for completeness; the most important feature is that signals from both eyes are mixed at the ‘crossover’, or chiasma, which performs a similar function to a telephone exchange. These digitised signals are then routed to separate, but complementary, areas of the visual cortex. Note particularly that this is an underside view of the human brain, and that almost all of the visual system is highly protected against all but the most extreme physical injury.²⁰





World War 2 bouncing bomb

the back of the brain, mainly in the visual area of our cortex. This processing is the subject of highly active research,¹⁹ but certainly the eye digitises all of its information; what is passed back to the visual cortex is an intense stream of signals, closely resembling the dots in a picture from a mass-printed page (half-tone screening), or the pointillist paintings by artists such as Seurat.

... and the Dialectics of Two

So far we have only considered one individual eye, but all higher organisms have two. This gives advantages of redundancy, a spare in case of injury to one. For instance, Ings² points out that, before the advent of protective goggles, blacksmiths would traditionally cover one eye with a patch to protect it from hot-metal sputter.

But possibly the most important function of two eyes working in tandem is that, by comparing information from the right and left eyes, via two channels, the brain can reconstruct the external world as a three-dimensional model. Being the synthesis of two different viewpoints, it will be a model of greater accuracy and detail than that from a single position, and with important relativities between viewed objects.

NB The term 'model' is used here due to the total absence of a more accurate word for the 'data package' by which all images are represented in the brain. There are no images within the brain, because there are no eyes in there to 'see' those images; likewise there are no words or paragraphs within the computer I am using to write this, only a myriad of electrical charges. Do not, however, degrade the brain to a mere computer!

Yet Another Triangle

In Part I we met a virtual triangle that linked the works of Darwin, Marx and Dodgson, suggesting a reliable base from which to gauge our world. But now, in examining our visual system and our ability, in the most common situation, to see two viewpoints at one time – and to assess the synthesis of those – we meet a triangle with only one fixed dimension, its baseline!

We have seen above, as part of the **second** deception, that our two eyes in conjunction are vitally important, but we need just a few more details about this particular attribute. In everyday use, our eyes are separated by about 60 mm. Viewing a distant object normally produces two coincident views of that object, with small variations due to the two different angles of view; a virtual triangle is formed with a fixed baseline of about 60 mm and a variable distance from that base to the apex, dependent on how far away is the viewed object.

This is triangulation, more commonly called stereoscopy. It enables us to locate a ball or bird in flight; and, with technical aids, the principle has been used to trace unlicensed radio stations, facilitate Barnes Wallis's 'bouncing bombs' in World War 2, and to measure the distance to planets and nearby stars. With the application of trigonometry and very precise stereo photography (photogrammetry), it can also be used to derive dimensioned drawings of ancient buildings and monuments, for aerial mapping, and for volumetric analysis.

Of more immediate relevance to us here is the corollary to triangulation, which we call parallax (see above), and

here we may need to refer to Fig 2. But whereas triangulation is a precise quantitative technique of mensuration, parallax within our visual system is qualitative. With practice, in say sports and athletics, we can develop a fair degree of precision to estimate the trajectory of a ball or the height of a jump, but we *always need the two different views* to be synthesized in our brain.

A Long Way Round?

We have now looked in enough detail at our visual system. From Part I we should have noted how evidence frightens our detractors, and conservatives and reactionaries generally. And we have more than sufficient evidence that the prevailing world view is 'upside down and the wrong way round'.

Just in passing we can note that high-tech industries are not immune from such confusions. On 4 April 1985 the *Guardian* reported that a section of a nuclear submarine had been "welded on upside down"; and on 23 October 2004 *New Scientist* reported that the NASA space probe Genesis had crashed back to earth in Utah, instead of parachuting gently back with its valuable cargo, because gravity-sensors had been installed upside down in the re-entry vehicle!

So, if you feel temporarily disoriented by these inversions, rotations and reversals, you are not alone: even the space research and nuclear submarine technologists are occasionally confused and prone to error.

Let us return to correcting some more of these anomalies. We have discovered, above, that a more accurate view of the world demands two different viewpoints, not the single one gratuitously provided

for us by the ruling strata of a class-divided society.

The rotation and correction of our first images is fairly easily accomplished; as shown earlier, we all start doing it as soon as we're born. The problem of parallax is different, and this invaluable ability is continuously menaced – and often overwhelmed – by the pernicious osmosis referred to in Part I. So, in a time of three-letter acronyms, perhaps another one will not come amiss. Opto-political parallax (OPP) quite simply describes the propaganda-scene in our current society, where the dominant right-wing view is staunchly maintained, to the near- or total-exclusion of any other view. The title might well sound a little over-the-top but it can help to remind us, contrary to the assertions of one infamous British prime minister, that there is always an alternative way of looking at things.

A brief personal anecdote is relevant here. In a talk on globalisation to a local grammar school sixth form, I told the students that, if they really wanted to understand what was happening around the world, they should compare the news from the 'left' and the 'right' points of view, simultaneously holding up both the current *Morning Star* and *Daily Telegraph*! In an echo of the 'Darwin' debate and Huxley's riposte (refer to end of Part I), one brave student said that he "wouldn't read **that** one, because it's communist". Recalling Huxley's elation, I asked the boy if he drove a car, which he did. "And before you drive off, do you first close your left eye?" I asked him. Many of his class-mates, from their reactions, fully absorbed the point, and I was never invited to give that lecture again! I also genuinely hope the young lad didn't too closely follow his ideology.

As the capitalist crisis develops, and as some people start to sharpen their critical faculties, a growing number discover that things begin to look a little different from a different viewpoint. The interrelationship of things may appear to change, although the actual change is only in the ways we see. A recent letter to a national newspaper writes of it as "like seeing for the first time",²¹ and another to a popular science magazine makes a similar comment,²² but merely from attaching correct names to things.

Before we pass on to Part III, and some more practical applications of the foregoing, we should note that OPP has not been confined to capitalist society, but has also played a part in destroying one socialist society, and strengthening another.

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NOTES ON CONTEMPORARY IMPERIALISM



By Prabhat Patnaik

Phases of Imperialism

Lenin¹ dated the imperialist phase of capitalism, which he associated with monopoly capitalism, from the beginning of the twentieth century, when the process of centralisation of capital had led to the emergence of monopoly in industry and among banks. The coming together (coalescence) of the capitals in these two spheres led to the formation of “finance capital” which was controlled by a financial oligarchy that dominated both these spheres, as well as the state, in each advanced capitalist country. The struggle between rival finance capitals for “economic territory”² in a world that was already completely partitioned, not just for the direct benefits that such “territory” might provide, but more importantly for keeping rivals out of its potential benefits, necessarily erupted, according to him, into wars, which offered each belligerent country’s workers a stark choice: between killing fellow-workers across the trenches, or turning their guns on the moribund capitalism of their own countries, to overthrow the system and march to socialism.

We can distinguish between three different phases of imperialism since then. The first phase, of which the Second World War was the climax, corresponded almost exactly to Lenin’s analysis: rivalry between different finance capitals to repartition an already partitioned world bursting into wars which in turn

led to the formation of a socialist camp. The precise course of events through which this general trend unfolded after Lenin’s death included an acute economic crisis (the Great Depression of the thirties), to which the disunity among capitalist powers contributed, and which in turn created the conditions for the emergence of fascism that unleashed the second world war and that represented in Dimitrov’s words the “open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital”.³

The Second World War greatly weakened the position of financial oligarchies. The working class in the advanced capitalist countries that had made great sacrifices during the war emerged much stronger from it and was unwilling to go back to the old capitalism. (A symptom of this was the defeat of Winston Churchill’s Tory Party in the post-war elections in Britain and the enormous growth of the Italian and French Communist Parties.) The socialist camp had grown significantly and was to grow even further with the victory of the Chinese Revolution. Capitalism had to make concessions to survive, and two concessions in particular were significant: one was decolonisation, where it was so reluctant to proceed that even after the formal process was completed it refused voluntarily to yield control over Third World resources, as evident in the cases of

Iran (where Mossadegh was overthrown in a CIA coup after nationalising oil) and Egypt (where an Anglo-French invasion was launched after Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal). The other was state intervention in ‘demand management’ in advanced countries to maintain high levels of employment, which until then had never been experienced in capitalist economies. Such intervention in turn was made possible through the imposition of controls over cross-border capital flows, and also trade flows. A new international monetary system, where the dollar was declared ‘as good as gold’ (exchangeable against gold at \$35 per ounce) and which allowed such restrictions on trade and capital flows, came into being. It reflected the new reality of the domination of US imperialism, and a muting of inter-imperialist rivalries in the new scenario. This was the second phase of modern imperialism.

The conditions for the third phase within which we are currently located were created by this second phase itself. The dollar’s being ‘as good as gold’ meant in effect that the US was handed a free and unlimited gold mine: it could print notes and the rest of the world was obliged to hold such notes since they were ‘as good as gold’. As a result, the US did print notes to finance, among other things, a string of military bases all over the world with which it encircled the Soviet Union and

China. These notes started pouring into European banks which then started lending all over the world. They wanted to lend even more as the torrent of notes increased during the Vietnam War. Capital controls were a hindrance in their way and were therefore gradually removed. The international monetary system under which the dollar was officially convertible to gold could not be sustained and was abandoned in the early seventies, though the pre-eminent position of the dollar as the form in which a large chunk of the world's wealth was held remained. But the easing of capital controls and increased mobility of finance across the globe brought into being a new entity, international finance capital.

This third phase of modern imperialism is marked by the hegemony of international finance capital, which is the driving force behind the phenomenon of globalisation, and the pursuit of neoliberal policies in the place of Keynesian demand management policies in the advanced countries and of Nehru-style 'planning' (or what some development economists call *dirigiste* policies) in the Third World.

Finance Capital Then and Now

In this third phase of imperialism there has been such an immense growth of the financial sector within each capitalist economy and of financial flows across the globe that many have talked of a process of 'financialisation' of capitalism, rather like 'industrialisation' earlier. While this may be an accurate description of the processes involved, it does not draw attention to the entity that has come into centre-stage, namely international finance capital. This entity differs from finance capital of Lenin's time in at least three ways.

First, while Lenin had talked about the "coalescence" of finance and industry and had referred to finance capital as capital "controlled by banks and employed by industrialists",⁴ which tended to have a national strategy for expanding "economic territory" that would also serve the needs of its industrial empire, the new finance capital is not necessarily tied to industry in any special sense. It moves around the world in the quest for quick, speculative, gains, no matter in what sphere such gains

accrue. This finance is not separate from industry, since even capital employed in industry is not immune to the quest for speculative gains, but industry does not occupy any special place in the plans of this finance capital. In other words, not only does capital-as-finance function as capital-as-finance, but even capital-in-production also functions as capital-as-finance; capital-as-finance on the other hand has no special interest in production. This is basically what the process of 'financialisation' involves, namely an enormous growth of capital-as-finance, pure and simple, and its quest for quick speculative gains.

Secondly, finance capital in Lenin's time had its base within a particular nation, and its international operations were linked to the expansion of national "economic territory". But the finance capital of today, though of course having origins in particular nations, is not necessarily tied to any national interests. It moves around globally and its objectives are no different from the finance capital that has its origins in some other nation. It is in this sense that distinctions between



national finance capitals become misleading, and we can talk of an international finance capital, which, no matter where it originates from, has this character of being detached from any particular national interests, having the world as its theatre of operations, and not being tied to any particular sphere of activity, such as industry.

Thirdly, such uninhibited global operation requires that the world should not be split up into separate blocs, or into economic territories that are the preserves of particular nations and out of bounds for others. The interests of international finance capital therefore require a muting of inter-imperialist rivalry. If this process of muting of inter-imperialist rivalry began in the post-war period as an outcome of the overwhelming economic and strategic strength of the US among capitalist powers, it gets sustained in the current phase by the very nature of international finance capital.

To say this is not to suggest that contradictions do not exist among these powers, or that they are not engaged in intense competition in world trade, of which the present currency wars (which amount to a 'beggar-my-neighbour' policy) are a reflection. But such contradictions are kept in check by the need of globalised finance to have the entire globe as its unrestricted arena of operations. Certainly, the idea of these contradictions bursting into open wars among the advanced capitalist countries, or even proxy wars among them, appears far-fetched in the foreseeable future.

Many have seen in this fact a vindication of Karl Kautsky's theory of "ultra-imperialism",⁵ which referred to the possibility of a peaceful and "joint exploitation of the world by internationally-united finance capital", as against Lenin's emphasis on inter-imperialist rivalry and the inevitability of wars. But the world has moved beyond the Kautskyan perception as well, so that using his concept of "ultra-imperialism" in today's context is misleading for at least two reasons. First, the "internationally-united finance capital" of Kautsky is not the same as "international finance capital" of today. We are not talking about unity among a handful of national finance capitals of major capitalist countries, but about an international phenomenon, which goes beyond national finance capitals and is no longer confined to a handful of powerful countries. It is composed of finance capitals of different national origins, including from Third World countries, and also moves around the entire globe pursuing its own interest,

and no particular national capitalist interest. Secondly, Lenin's emphasis on wars as accompanying imperialism remains as valid today as it was in his time.

World wars among imperialist countries may not appear on the horizon; but other kinds of war arising from the phenomenon of imperialism continue – the Iraq war, the war in Afghanistan, and the earlier war in the Balkans being examples.

Globalisation of Finance and the Nation State

In the current phase of imperialism, finance capital has become international, while the state remains a nation state. The nation state therefore willy-nilly must bow before the wishes of finance, for otherwise finance (both originating in that country and brought in from outside) will leave that particular country and move elsewhere, reducing it to illiquidity and disrupting its economy. The process of globalisation of finance therefore has the effect of undermining the autonomy of the nation state. The state cannot do what it wishes to do, or what its elected government has been elected to do, since it must do what finance wishes it to do.

It is in the nature of finance capital to oppose any state intervention, other than that which promotes its own interest. It does not want an activist state when it comes to the promotion of employment, or the provision of welfare, or the protection of small and petty producers; but it wants the state to be active exclusively in its own interest. It brings about therefore a change in the nature of the state, from being an apparently supra-class entity standing above society, and intervening in a benevolent manner for 'social good', to one that is concerned almost exclusively with the interests of finance capital. To justify this change, which occurs in the era of globalisation under pressure from finance capital, the interests of finance are increasingly passed off as being synonymous with the interests of society. If the stock market is doing well then the economy is supposed to be doing well, no matter what happens to the level of hunger, malnutrition and poverty. If a country is graded well by credit-rating agencies then that becomes a matter of national pride, no matter how miserable its people are.

The point however is that this 'inverted logic', this apparent illusionism, is not just a misconception or false propaganda; it has an element of truth and is rooted in the actual universe of globalisation. It is indeed the case that if finance lacks 'confidence' in a particular

country and flows out of it, then that country will face dire consequences through a liquidity crisis, so that pleasing finance, no matter how oppressive it is, is a pre-condition for economic survival within this system. This 'inverted logic' therefore is the direct off-shoot of a real-life phenomenon, namely the hegemony of international finance capital. It cannot be overcome by appealing to some 'correct logic' or some 'correct priorities of the state'; it requires the transcendence of the hegemony of international finance capital. It requires in short not 'reform' within a system dominated by finance capital but an overcoming of the system itself.

Finance capital's insistence upon a non-activist state, except when the activism is in its own interest, takes in particular the form of imposing fiscal austerity upon the state. In the old days, the 'sound finance' on the part of the state that was favoured by finance capital consisted in a balancing of its budget. At present it takes the form, pervasively, of a 3% limit on the size of the fiscal deficit relative to Gross Domestic Product. This is the limit legislated across the world from the EU to India and sought to be enforced. (The one exception among capitalist countries is the US which systematically ignores whatever 'fiscal responsibility' legislation exists in its statute books, and alone among these countries enjoys a degree of fiscal autonomy. But this is because its currency is still considered *de facto*, though no longer *de jure*, 'as good as gold', and hence constitutes the medium in which much of the world's wealth is held; capital flight out of the US, owing to displeasure on the part of finance over the size of its fiscal deficit, will therefore be resisted by the entire capitalist world, a fact that speculators themselves are well aware of).

Since the nation state pursuing trade liberalisation has to cut customs duties, and therefore must restrict excise duties (so as not to discriminate between domestic and foreign capitalists); and since, in the interests of 'capital accumulation', it keeps taxes low on corporate incomes – and hence, for reasons of *inter se* parity, on personal incomes; the limit on the fiscal deficit causes an expenditure deflation on its part. And this provides the setting for privatising not only state-owned assets, 'for a song', but also welfare services and social overheads like education and health.

All this is usually referred to as constituting a 'withdrawal of the state' and its rationale is debated in terms of 'the state' versus 'the market'.

Nothing could be more wrong than this. The state under neoliberalism does not withdraw; it is involved as closely as before, or even more closely than before, in the economy, but its intervention is now of a different sort, *viz* exclusively in the interests of finance capital.

The recent events in Greece and Ireland underscore this point. The state in those countries incurred a fiscal deficit in order to shore up the banks which had financed speculative bubbles earlier and have now come a cropper with the bursting of the bubbles. To cut the fiscal deficit, however, the state now has to wind up its welfare measures, at the expense of the working masses. The state in short intervenes in favour of finance capital, but withdraws from intervention in favour of the working people. In India, despite a massive inflation in food prices, the state is hoarding 60 million tonnes of food grains because their release through the Public Distribution System⁶ will raise the fiscal deficit, and hence offend finance capital.

Not surprisingly, both Keynesian demand management in the advanced capitalist countries and Third World *dirigisme* become untenable in the era of globalisation. The nation state in the era of globalisation in short becomes a custodian of the interests of international finance capital, which has the obvious effect of attenuating, diminishing and making a mockery of political democracy.

The Global Financial Community

The restrictions on the activities of the nation state are imposed not just by the fear of capital flight. A whole ideological apparatus, and with it a whole army of ideologues, gets built for supporting neoliberal policies. Since finance capital itself becomes international in character, the controllers of this international finance capital constitute, to borrow Lenin's expression, a global financial oligarchy. This oligarchy requires for its functioning an army of spokesmen, media persons, professors, bureaucrats, technocrats and politicians located in different countries.

The creation of this army is a complex enterprise, in which one can discern at least three distinct processes. Two are fairly straightforward. If a country has been drawn into the vortex of globalised finance by opening its doors to the free movement of finance capital, then willy-nilly even well-meaning bureaucrats, politicians, and professors will demand, in the national interest, a bowing to the caprices of the global financial oligarchy, since not doing so will cost the country

dear through debilitating and destabilising capital flights. The task in short is automatically accomplished to an extent once a country has got trapped into opening its doors to financial flows.

The second process is the exercise of peer pressure. When finance ministers, governors of central banks and top financial bureaucrats of different countries meet, they tend increasingly to constitute what has been called an 'epistemic community'. They begin increasingly to speak the same language, share the same world view and subscribe to the same prejudices, the same theoretical positions that have been aptly described as the "humbug of finance".⁷ Those who do not are under tremendous peer pressure to fall in line; and most eventually do. Peer pressure may be buttressed by the more mundane temptations that Lenin had described, ranging from straightforward bribes to lucrative offers of post-retirement employment, but, whatever the method used, conformism to the "humbug" that globalised finance dishes out as true economics becomes a mark of 'respectability'.

But even peer pressure requires that there should be a group of core ideologues of finance capital who exert and manipulate this pressure. The 'peers' themselves are not free-floating individuals but have to be goaded into sharing a belief-system. There has to be therefore a set of key intellectuals, ideologues, thinkers and strategists that promote this belief system, shape and broadcast the ideology of finance capital, and generally look after the interests of globalised finance. They are not necessarily capitalists or magnates; but they are close to the financial magnates, and usually share the spoils. The financial oligarchy proper, consisting of these magnates, together with these key ideologues and publicists of finance capital, constitute the 'global financial community'. The function of this 'community' is to promote and perpetuate the hegemony of international finance capital. And this global financial community insinuates its way into the political systems of various countries, initially as IMF and World Bank-trained 'advisers' into economic ministries, and subsequently as cabinet ministers, and even office-bearers, of established political parties.

Reforms are undertaken everywhere in the education system to rid it of the vestiges of any world-view different from what the global financial community propagates. They play an important role in the ideological hegemony of finance capital. The process of privatisation and

commoditisation of education facilitates the instituting of such reforms.

Contradictions of Globalisation

The neoliberal regime imposed upon the world by the ascendancy of globalised finance capital entails a number of serious contradictions which bring the system to an impasse. What we are witnessing at present is such an impasse. There are at least four contradictions which need to be noted.

The first consists in the fact that free movement of goods and services and of capital (though not of labour) has made it difficult to sustain the wage difference between the advanced and backward economies that had traditionally characterised capitalism. Since broadly similar technologies are available to all economies (and the free movement of capital ensures this), commodities produced with the cheaper labour that exists in the Third World economies can out-compete those produced in the advanced countries. Because of this, wages in the advanced countries cannot rise, and if anything tend to fall in order to make their products more competitive, to move a little closer towards the levels that prevail in the Third World – levels which are no higher, thanks to the existence of substantial labour reserves, than those needed to satisfy some historically-determined subsistence requirements.

Advanced-country workers in other words can no longer escape the baneful consequences of Third World labour reserves (which were created through colonial and semi-colonial exploitation that caused deindustrialisation and a 'drain of surplus'). And, even as wages in the advanced countries fall, at the prevailing levels of labour productivity, in the Third World countries labour productivity moves up, at the prevailing level of wages, towards the level reached in the advanced countries. This is because the wage differences that still remain induce a diffusion of activities from the former to the latter. This double movement means that the share of wages in the total world output decreases. Such a reduction occurs for yet another reason: as technological progress in the world economy raises the level of labour productivity all around, the wages of workers do not increase in tandem, again owing to these wages being tied to the existence of substantial labour reserves in the world economy.

As a result, taking the world economy as a whole, there is both an increase in income inequalities and, as a consequence, a growing problem of



inadequate aggregate demand. Since a dollar in the hands of the working people is spent on consumption while a dollar in the hands of the capitalists is partly saved, any shift in income distribution from wages to profits tends to depress demand and create a 'realisation problem'. Credit-financed expenditure and expenditure stimulated by speculative asset price bubbles provide only temporary antidotes to this tendency towards over-production at the world level; but with the bursting of such bubbles and the inevitable termination of such credit financing, the basic underlying crisis of the world economy reappears with all its intensity.

The second contradiction under the neoliberal regime arises from this. Any deficiency of aggregate demand resulting in unemployment and recession naturally affects the high-wage and therefore high-cost producers in the advanced countries more severely than those in the low-wage countries like India or China. Countries like the United States therefore experience, as a result of this world tendency towards over-production, not only higher levels of unemployment but also continuous and growing current account deficits on their balance of payments. In short, acute unemployment, particularly in the hitherto high-wage economies, and the so-called problem of 'world imbalances' (whereby countries like China have continuous and growing current account surpluses while the United States has growing deficits and hence gets increasingly indebted) are both caused by the neoliberal regime imposed upon the world by globalised finance capital. While the US multinational corporations and US financial interests demand neoliberal regimes everywhere, the fall-out of this demand is reduced wages and employment for the US workers.

If the state in the advanced economies like the US could intervene to promote demand then unemployment there could be reduced. But, as we have seen, the regime of globalised finance entails a rolling back of state intervention in demand management. Of course, the state of the leading economy, the US – whose currency, being almost 'as good as gold', enjoys a degree of immunity from the caprices of international finance capital in this respect – still retains some fiscal autonomy and can still undertake demand management, since capital flight away from its currency will not be too serious. But since the leading-currency country itself is getting progressively indebted, its ability to undertake demand

management also suffers. The incapacity of the capitalist state to undertake demand management as earlier constitutes the third contradiction of the neoliberal regime, within which therefore there is no effective solution to the problem of global overproduction and global imbalances.

Neoliberalism in short pushes capitalism towards a protracted crisis for several co-acting reasons: it creates a tendency towards over-production in the world economy by engendering inequalities in world income distribution; it enfeebles capitalist nation states for undertaking demand management; and it also undermines the capacity of the leading state to play a similar role, but for a different reason, namely by saddling it with continuous and acute current account deficits.

It may be thought that the crisis we are talking about is primarily concerned with the advanced capitalist world, which will continue to remain sunk in it for a long time to come (and if by chance there is a new bubble that temporarily lifts it out of this crisis, its inevitable collapse will plunge it back into crisis); that the Third World, especially countries like India, are immune to it. This however is where the fourth contradiction of neoliberal capitalism becomes relevant. This relates to the fact that the bourgeois-led state in the Third World withdraws from its role of supporting, protecting and promoting the peasant and petty producers' economy, as the domestic big bourgeoisie and financial interests become closely integrated with international finance capital under the neoliberal regime, leading to a fracturing of the nation and the development of a deep hiatus within it. The abandonment of this role which the bourgeois-led state had taken upon itself during the *dirigiste* period, as a part of the legacy of the struggle for decolonisation, causes a decimation of petty production, the unleashing of a process of primitive accumulation of capital (or what may more generally be called a process of "accumulation through encroachment"⁸). Multinational retail chains like Walmart come up to displace petty traders; agribusiness comes in to squeeze the peasantry; land-grabbing financiers come in to displace peasants from their land; and petty producers of all descriptions everywhere get trapped between rising input prices caused by withdrawal of state subsidies and declining output prices caused by the withdrawal of state protection from world commodity price trends. When we add to all this the rise in the cost of living, because of the privatisation of education, health and

several essential services, which affects the entire working population, we can gauge the virulence of the process of primitive accumulation that is unleashed.

The current period therefore is one where it is not only the advanced capitalist countries that are beset with crisis and unemployment, but even apparently 'successful' 'high growth' countries like India. The former are affected by the problem of inadequate demand, the latter by both the fall-out of the former's crisis (via its effects on peasants' prices and export activities) and also by the additional problem of distress and dispossession of petty producers and the unemployment engendered by it. Both segments of the world economy therefore get afflicted by acute social crisis.

Some Other Perspectives on Contemporary Imperialism

We have discussed contemporary imperialism so far by taking Lenin's analysis as our point of departure. In contemporary writings on imperialism however we come across certain other perspectives. Let us examine some of these.

One such perspective sees imperialism not in terms of the immanent economic logic of capitalism, which, through the process of centralisation of capital, gives rise first to the finance capital that Lenin had analysed, and subsequently to international finance capital; instead it emphasises imperialism as a political project undertaken by the state of the leading imperialist country, the US, for globalising its brand of capitalism through enlisting the support of other advanced capitalist states. It therefore sees continuity in the imperialist project in the post-war period, in terms of a persistent attempt by the US state to build an 'informal empire' by taking other capitalist states on board. This project might have been thwarted in some periods (such as the *dirigiste* period in the Third World) and advanced rapidly in others (such as the more recent 'era of globalisation'). But through all these vicissitudes it is essentially a conscious, planned political project.

The difference between this perspective and the one outlined earlier is methodological and hence quite fundamental. By taking the leading country's state as the driving force behind imperialism, it attributes not just a relative autonomy to the state but in fact an absolute autonomy. The state, it admits, acts within an economic milieu, but it does not see economics as driving politics. In fact it rejects such a proposition as

being ‘reductionist’. It therefore departs from the fundamental understanding of capitalism as being a spontaneous or self-driven system that is unplanned, and therefore incapable of resolving its own basic contradictions.

An immediate consequence of this position is an underestimation of the current impasse of capitalism. More generally, the methodological flaw in the approach that attributes an autonomy to politics is that it cannot anticipate events, but can only explain them *post facto*. There are no foreclosed options for capitalism in any given situation imposed by the intrinsic economic logic of the system; the state as an autonomous agency can always mould the system to overcome whatever predicament it may happen to be in. Whether it will be able to do so or not can only be known after the event. This approach therefore is not conducive to conscious revolutionary praxis founded upon the building of revolutionary class alliances on the basis of anticipating the course of movement of society as a whole.

A very different perspective is provided by the influential work *Empire* by Hardt and Negri,⁹ which talks of a transition from “modern” imperialism based on nation states to a “post-modern” global Empire, a transnational entity comparable to ancient Rome. With the rise of the Empire, there is an end to national conflicts. The Empire is total: victorious global capitalism completely permeates our social lives, appropriates for itself the entire space of “civilisation” and presents its “enemy” only as a “criminal”, a “terrorist” who is a threat not to a political system or a nation but to the entire ethical order.

Unlike the standard Leftist position, however, which struggles to limit the destructive potential of globalisation, by preserving the welfare state for instance, Hardt and Negri see a revolutionary potential in this dynamic; the standard Left position from their perspective therefore appears to be a conservative one, fearful of the dynamics of globalisation. In this sense they can claim an affinity to Marx who did not advocate limiting the destructive potential of capitalism but saw in it an enormous advance for humankind which had to be carried forward through the transcendence of capitalism itself.

But, even if this affinity is granted for argument’s sake, there is nonetheless a basic difference even in this regard between Marx on the one hand and Hardt and Negri on the other. This difference consists in the fact that,



while Marx saw not only the necessity for the transcendence of capitalism but also that the system produced the instrument, *viz* the proletariat, through which it could be carried out, Hardt and Negri’s practical proposals for going beyond contemporary globalisation come as a damp squib.

The authors propose political struggles for three global rights: the right to global citizenship, the right to a minimal income, and the right to a reappropriation of the new means of production (*ie* access to and control over education, information and communication). Instead of concrete strategies of struggle, we thus end up with mere pious wishes.

Take for instance the right to a minimal income. The immanent tendency of capitalism to produce “wealth at one extreme and poverty at the other”¹⁰ is manifesting itself at present through a vicious process of absolute immiseration, caused by an unleashing of primitive accumulation of capital that is not accompanied by any significant absorption of the impoverished into the ranks of the proletariat. The demand for a minimal level of income in this context is meaningless unless we are willing to transcend capitalism and struggle for an alternative system which is free of any immanent tendency to produce such absolute impoverishment. The logic of this alternative system, the nature of this alternative system, the road-map for getting to this alternative system (which we call socialism) must therefore be worked out if we are serious about the right to a minimal level of income. The demand for such a right within capitalism then can only play the role of a transitional demand (in Lenin’s sense), which is unrealisable within the system but which can act as a mobilising,

educating and illuminating device.

To argue in general for a minimal level of income therefore is an illusion if it is considered achievable within capitalism, and a mere pious wish if the contours of a society within which it is achievable are not analysed. To detach this demand from the struggle for socialism is reflective of a theoretical flaw which afflicts *Empire*. The book, notwithstanding its several insights, does not have any analysis of the tendencies immanent in globalisation, does not examine the economics of the system, does not see its spontaneity, its self-driven character that both creates its own grave-diggers and gives rise to conjunctures for revolutionary political praxis.

Georg Lukacs had once said that the remarkable property of Marxism was that every idea that apparently went beyond Marx was in fact a reversion to something pre-Marxian. Hardt and Negri’s post-Marxist analysis paradoxically ends up regressing to a position that is even pre-utopian socialist.

The Struggle Against Imperialism

It was argued earlier that the nature of the crisis differed somewhat between the First and Third Worlds. In the former it is primarily a crisis of insufficiency of aggregate demand, which manifests itself in terms of unemployment and unutilised capacity; while in the latter, especially in countries like India, this aspect of the crisis – though not altogether absent – is as yet muted, while impoverishment of the peasants and petty producers through a process of primitive accumulation of capital – and of the workers too as a consequence – takes centre stage. It follows that class alliances behind the struggle will be



different in the two theatres.

In the former, the working class, the immigrants, the so-called 'underclass', together with the white-collar employees and the urban middle class, will combine to provide resistance, as is happening in Greece, France, Ireland and Britain – though of course, as also happens in all such situations, there is a parallel growth of fascism promoted by finance capital that seeks to thwart and disrupt this resistance. In the latter it is the peasants, petty producers, agricultural labourers, marginalised sections like the tribal peoples and dalits,¹¹ and the working class that will combine to provide the resistance, while segments of the urban middle class, who are as yet untouched by crisis in any form and benefit from the high growth ushered in by globalisation, may for the time being become followers of the big bourgeoisie and financial interests.

The crucial difference thus relates to two segments: the peasants and petty producers who are a significant anti-imperialist force in the Third World but are of less significance in the First; and the urban middle class, which is a militant force in the First World (as exemplified for instance by massive student protests), but vacillates or tails the big bourgeoisie at the moment in the Third World. (Latin America is different in this respect both in having a relatively small peasantry and in having an urban middle class that has experienced acute distress caused by its longer history of globalisation and unrestrained neoliberalism.)

Given this difference, a coordinated global resistance is not on the horizon, in which case the struggle against imperialist globalisation must take diverse forms in diverse regions. In countries like India at any rate, it must entail forming a worker-peasant alliance around a national agenda based on a judicious de-linking from the global order.

The proposal for a selective de-linking of the national economy from the global economy will be objected to by many, since it appears to involve a retreat to 'nationalism' from a regime of globalisation. True, globalisation is dominated by international finance capital and is carried out under the aegis of imperialism, but the way to fight it, many would argue, is through coordinated international actions by the workers and peasants. Nationalism, even anti-imperialist nationalism, they would hold, represents a retreat from such international struggles, and hence a degree of shutting oneself off from the world, which has potentially reactionary implications.

There are two basic arguments against this position. First, internationally-coordinated struggle, even of workers, is not a feasible proposition in the foreseeable future. And when we see the peasantry as being a major force in the struggle against imperialist globalisation in countries like India, so infeasible is the international coordination of peasant struggles that one cannot help feeling that those who insist on such international coordination are altogether oblivious of the peasant question. In other words, any analysis that accords centrality to the alliance of workers and peasants as the means of embarking on an alternative strategy, cannot but see the struggle against imperialist globalisation as being nation-based, with the objective of bringing about a change in the nature of the nation state.

Secondly, as already mentioned, such de-linking is essential for bringing about an improvement in the living condition of workers in any country. And the workers who struggle for such an improvement cannot possibly be asked to wait until a new world state has come into being that is favourably disposed to the interests of workers and peasants.

Any delay on the part of the Left in Third World countries like India in working towards such a worker-peasant alliance against imperialist globalisation will have serious consequences for another reason: the peasants will not wait for the Left to organise them; they will turn to all kinds of fundamentalist organisations to spearhead their resistance against the new global order, if the Left does not step in. It is possible to detect the class support of peasants and petty producers behind the Islamic fundamentalism of an Ahmedinijad in Iran, just as the same class support lies behind the rise of an Evo Morales in Bolivia. Whether we follow the Iranian or the Bolivian trajectory depends upon how quickly the Left moves to organise the peasantry as a militant force aligned with the working class against imperialist globalisation.

But, leaving aside pragmatism, doesn't a retreat into a national agenda represent a conservative, defensive reaction of the sort that Hardt and Negri had criticised, as opposed to seizing the dynamics of globalisation for a revolutionary carrying forward of the process? Isn't a retreat to a national agenda against the march of history, an undialectical act of setting the clock back? The answer to this question lies in the fact that the forward march of history

is ensured by the lead provided by a force that comprehends the historical process as a whole, a force that brings the revolutionary class outlook to the working class and organises the peasantry around it. The march of history is not reducible to formulae about whether the terrain of resistance is national or international; it depends upon whether the leading force in the resistance is internationalist or reactionary.

The crisis of capitalism, as argued earlier, is likely to be a protracted one. It will pass through many phases and many twists and turns, some even adverse to the Left, just as during the unfolding of the 1930s crisis. But it is pregnant with historical possibilities of a socialist transition for humankind if the Left makes proper use of this conjuncture, as Lenin had done earlier.

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The crisis and the regression of our time

By Jimmy Jancovich

William Morris with the Hammersmith branch of the Socialist League

The Noticeable Regression to 19th Century Conditions

A number of people have commented on the similarity of the present period to that of the 19th century. Some have compared it to that of the Poor Laws of the 1830s and others to the upsurge of trade union and working class activity in the 1880s and 1890s. There is certainly a parallel to be drawn between the cuts in benefits for unemployed and handicapped people, and those of the Poor Law, the purpose in both cases being to force people to accept employment, however low the wages.

However, the main similarity is with the 1880s and 1890s, a period of upsurge in trade union and working-class political activity. This was the period when the first socialist movements began, in which the Fabian Society, the SDF, the Socialist League and the ILP laid the basis for the creation of the Labour Party at the turn of the century. It was in this period that street demonstrations became a major feature of working-class activity and conflict – and when unskilled workers, for the first time, began to be organised.

While the increasing militancy, the demands for the

abolition of anti-union laws, the opposition to cuts in social services and the greater readiness to go on strike, had already begun in the last years of the recent Labour government, it is especially in response to the much more brutal Tory attacks on the working class that this has become most noticeable – for reasons similar to the upsurge in the 1880s and 90s. Then it was the increasing disillusionment of the working class political clubs with the Liberal Party's failure to carry out its avowed programmes (the war with and occupation of Egypt, the failure to achieve Irish Home Rule in particular). Today, the failure of New Labour to repeal the anti-union laws, to renationalise the railways, to face up to the employers, as well as its programme of encouraging privatisation and cuts in public services, have led to an upsurge of independent, union-based, working class militancy.

There are however very marked differences between the conditions then and now. In the course of the intervening century the whole character of capitalism and indeed, its whole economic, social and political organisation, has changed.



Basic Economic Differences between the 19th and 21st Centuries

The 19th century was a period of expanding capitalism, of developing new forces, creating more real wealth by making labour more productive, of rising working-class educational levels (since capitalism needed skilled workers), of increasing democracy, not only by extending the franchise but also by increasing the importance of the House of Commons in the whole political system.

Capitalism in the 19th century was essentially based on industry, agriculture and trade – that is, on production and distribution, whereas in present day capitalism the finance sector has acquired a predominant role.

In short, capitalism has moved from being a productive, creative and a

progressive force to becoming a *totally parasitic system* which, far from increasing wealth by making labour more productive, prefers to close down efficient and productive factories and delocalise to less efficient ones in low-wage areas.

Whereas, in the 19th century, the criterion of profitability was the increase in operational profits and dividends, today the main emphasis is on increasing the stock market value of shares, often more on the basis of speculation than of real operational profitability.

There is also a fundamental difference between increasing labour productivity and skill or product quality by introducing machinery, and the trend of completely replacing and deskilling workers by automated processes, which has been an increasing feature of industrial development in the last half century.

Cultural Differences with the 19th Century

The 19th century saw the introduction of widening education facilities, of creating evening classes, Mechanics' Institutes etc¹ to raise workers' levels of skill. The whole trend for the last quarter-century has been towards de-skilling labour, abandoning apprenticeship schemes, reducing educational standards – and more recently towards reversing the process of encouraging young people to go to University, firstly by introducing tuition fees and now by drastically increasing them.

Differences between 19th and 21st Century Politics

The question of democracy, then and now, can be examined from three different angles: the representivity of the House of Commons; the balance of power between it and the Lords

and, later, between the executive (the Cabinet) and the individual Members of the House of Commons; and the possibility of people holding minority or anti-establishment views being elected.

No-one can deny the increase in the House of Commons' representivity in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. From the beginning, when most of the MPs were clients of the big (largely Whig) landowners (the 'rotten boroughs'), to the middle of the 20th century, when virtually every adult man and woman had the right to vote, the situation shows a dramatic increase in representivity. This is less the case today as an increasing percentage of the population is made up of resident immigrants, who do not have the right to vote, at least in general elections.

Side by side with this came the diminishing role of the House of Lords. By the middle of the 20th century the Lords had virtually ceased to have any political role. It remained the final court of appeal, but this power was limited to the Law Lords, *ie* the small number of senior judges who had *ex officio* seats in the Lords. Today, with the increasing use of life peerages to give unpopular (and so unelectable!) politicians an opportunity for acting in support of the government, the balance is again shifting backwards at the expense of the Commons (*eg* the quite exceptional role played by Mandelson).

At the same time, the fact that the party system was late in consolidating itself (neither the Whigs nor the Tories were real parties, rather they were cliques of gentlemen, generally landed gentry) meant that neither the Cabinet nor the Prime Minister had any real control over the MPs of their party. Indeed, dissent was so much ingrained into British attitudes (starting with the religious field) that it would have been impossible.



Mechanics' Institutes provided spaces for the public to engage with science in the 19th century.

Thus the Conservative and Liberal Parties were formed when Palmerston and part of the Tory party rebelled against its (Tory) Prime Minister, Robert Peel, over his repeal of the Corn Laws. This pushed him into an effective alliance with the Whigs, thus creating the Liberal Party, while Palmerston's faction became the Conservative Party. The differences even affected imperial policy, the Conservatives becoming the most outright imperialists and the Liberals continuing the Whig reservations about imperial expansion.

Nor was the Prime Minister always the boss of the Cabinet. Until Margaret Thatcher, the Cabinet was much more of a collective. In the Liberal government that ruled Britain from 1906 to 1910, the Prime Minister was Campbell Bannerman, but he was overshadowed by Lloyd George, Asquith and Edward Grey – not to mention Winston Churchill, who made his debut as Home Secretary in this government.

In the same way, Attlee was certainly not a political boss on the American model – Ernest Bevin, Herbert Morrison, Stafford Cripps and Nye Bevan all had leading roles in his first government.

Nor did MPs always accept Cabinet decisions tamely. Indeed, changes of government were most often the result of revolts in the governing party.

Gladstone's ministry in the 1880s fell when some of his own party refused to vote for Irish home rule, creating a new Liberal Unionist party. Both Chamberlain and Eden were forced to resign as Prime Minister when enough of their own backbenchers either abstained or voted against them in votes of confidence. The first event created the wartime coalition government and ultimately the post-war Labour victory. The second, after a short interim, brought in Macmillan's government and the recognition that direct

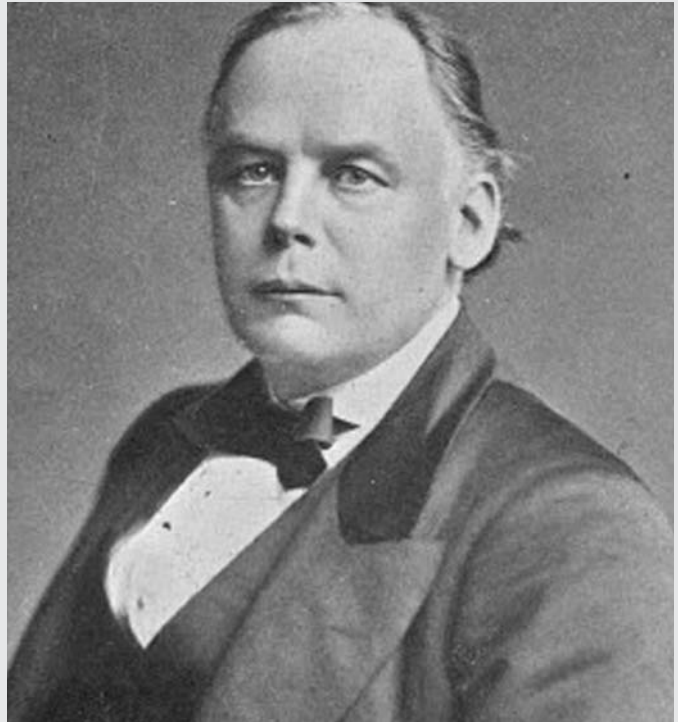
colonial rule was no longer feasible.

There were two internal revolts against Attlee's government. The first was over the Nenni telegram, the second when Nye Bevan and four junior Ministers (including Harold Wilson) resigned over the introduction of prescription charges. If the first, because of the growing Cold War polarisation, failed to make any lasting impact, the second probably led to Labour's defeat in 1951 and a long internal struggle that ended with Harold Wilson becoming Prime Minister of the 1964 Labour government.

Similarly, dissenting opinions were not an absolute barrier to election in the 19th century. Despite our image of the period as being one of narrow Victorian conformism, Charles Bradlaugh, a notorious atheist and feminist, was elected to Parliament as a Liberal (despite the constitutional problems² this raised). The people of Northampton who elected him were certainly neither atheists nor feminists! Today the only way a Moslem could be elected to Parliament would be in a constituency with a predominantly Moslem population.

Conclusion

Today the swing is back to the repressive and authoritarian attitudes of the first half of the 19th Century. Moreover, since Thatcher and Blair, the Prime Minister has become an American-style political boss, packing the House of Commons with his supporters, even to the extent of overruling candidates chosen by local constituency parties. Much the same thing is happening elsewhere in Europe: in France, for example, President Sarkozy has manipulated the constitution to acquire almost monarchical powers and the Assembly is increasingly becoming just a rubber stamp for presidential decisions – as the House of Commons had



Charles Bradlaugh MP for Northampton 1880–1891

become under Blair and Brown. In the EU, the unelected Commission has superior legislative powers to those of the European Parliament.

In brief, capitalism has made a full circle – from its authoritarian and undemocratic beginnings under the Tudors and Early Stuarts, through a period of gradually increasing democracy and human rights back to the *repressive attitudes and practices of nearly two centuries ago*.

The current crisis is, thus, not just an economic or financial one – it is a crisis of the whole capitalist *political and social* system. Increasingly the issue is not one of the legality of forms of dissent or of existing institutions but of their legitimacy – or lack thereof. In this situation, Parliament is rapidly losing its authority,³ if not its power. The future must mainly lie with broad extra-parliamentary movements, with co-ordinated mass struggle. The emphasis must, of course, be on co-ordination, to ensure maximum effectiveness. While the political groups and

parties *remain important as generators of ideas and long-term perspectives*, the only bodies that can ensure effective co-ordination are the trade unions. This is just the situation envisaged by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*⁴ – and by William Morris in *News from Nowhere* in 1890.

Notes and References

- 1 Indeed, the first primary schools and evening classes were often created by working class bodies. Only later were they taken over by local authorities.
- 2 Bradlaugh's refusal to take the Oath of Allegiance on the Bible, as proscribed, but insisting on his right to affirm required a change of Parliamentary procedure before he could take his seat.
- 3 I use "authority" in its original sense of the respect given to people or institutions whose knowledge or public spirit is widely accepted – the very opposite to authoritarianism. We need to find a new word for the latter, such as "absolutism".
- 4 In particular the *Manifesto's* insistence that the achievement of communism would be the *work of the working class itself* and that the role of the communists was to maintain and advance the ultimate objectives of total emancipation *side by side with* the day to day struggles; see K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 6, p 504 ff.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz birth centenary

Celebrating the idea of revolution

The birth centenary of eminent Pakistani poet and communist Faiz Ahmed Faiz took place on February 13, 2011. Celebrations of this event are taking place throughout the year, and details of those in Britain can be found at <http://www.faizcentenary.org>. Faiz may not be known to many of our readers, so CR reproduces here the Editorial published in People's Democracy, weekly paper of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), on the actual centenary date.



“ It is a remarkable coincidence that this issue of *People's Democracy* is dated on the birth centenary of eminent poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a powerful ideological symbol of the fight against oppression, of the defence of democratic rights and of the love for humanity. We commemorate this occasion as a celebration of the idea of Revolution.

A committed Marxist, one of the greatest Urdu poets, a journalist, film maker, trade unionist, broadcaster, teacher, translator, Lenin Peace Prize winner, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, had also served in the British Indian Army, rising to the rank of Lt Colonel. Born in Sailkot, Faiz was educated in Lahore, the city which served as his base throughout his life. He continued to live there after the unfortunate partition of the subcontinent. The trauma, torture and torment of the partition are deeply reflected in his poetry. His love for the liberation of the peoples of the subcontinent as a whole was unquestionable. When Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, a London newspaper said that Faiz was “a brave enough man to fly from Lahore to Delhi for Gandhi's funeral at the height of the Indo-Pakistan hatred”.

His work reflects the fact that his identification with the masses of the poor and exploited, his espousal of the cause of liberation from all forms of oppression and exploitation, was complete. He was an active member of the anti-fascist movement and the struggle for freedom from colonialism led by the Communist Party of undivided India. Along with great stalwarts of his time, he was

instrumental in founding the Progressive Writers Association in 1936 when the communists also organised the students in the All India Students Federation and the peasantry in the Kisan Sabha¹ in the same year.

The Communist Party sent Comrade Sajjad Zaheer² along with some others to organise the Communist Party in Pakistan. Sajjad Zaheer, also a noted and accomplished intellectual and writer, became the founding general secretary of the Communist Party of Pakistan. However, in 1951, Sajjad Zaheer, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and other leading communists were imprisoned in solitary confinement under sentences of death in the infamous Rawalpindi conspiracy case. Faiz remained in prison for over four years.

Far from either breaking his spirit or sapping his energy for the cause of the revolution, imprisonment stimulated Faiz's creativity. The remarkable tribute brought out by Pakistan's leading group of newspapers *Dawn*, in 2004, informs us of his impressions during imprisonment. “Like love”, he wrote, “imprisonment is a basic experience. It opens many new windows on the soul”. Some of his best works were to emerge from the confinements of the jails. *Dast-e-Saba (The Wind Writes)* and *Zindan Nama (Prison Journal)* elevated him to the status of a literary poetic genius.

In *Dast-e-Saba*, he reflects the basic essence of the Marxist outlook when he states that: “The understanding of the struggle of human life, and a participation in it, is not only a prerequisite of life, it is also a prerequisite of art”.

While studying the eternal humanity-nature dialectic, Marx and Engels reached the conclusion that, as individuals express their life, so they are. What they are coincides with their production, both with what they produce and how they produce. Hence what individuals are depends upon material conditions of production.

Eric Hobsbawm, in his latest book,³ recalls that at the 2007 Jewish book week coinciding with Marx's death anniversary, Jacques Attali while paying tribute to Marx had said, “Philosophers before him had thought of man in his totality, but he was the first to apprehend the world as a whole which is at once political, economic, scientific and philosophical”. This personal attribute of Marx is actually a reflection of the attribute of the Marxist world outlook. This goes beyond the conventional meaning of an ‘interdisciplinary’ approach to the world. Marxism, a creative science, is transdisciplinary, integrating all disciplines of thought and creative capacities of the human mind.

Faiz, in a sense, reflects such an integrated approach through his life and work in the times that he lived. In his preface to *The Rebel's Silhouette*⁴ Agha Shahid Ali says, "Faiz was such a master of the *ghazal*,⁵ a form that predates Chaucer, that he transformed its every stock image and, as if by magic, brought absolutely new associations into being. For example, the Beloved – an archetypal figure in Urdu poetry – can mean friend, woman, God. (Or, for that matter, Motherland, that Bahadur Shah Zafar⁶ lamented for his burial, when blinded in confinement by the British in Rangoon.) Faiz not only tapped into those meanings, but extended them to include the Revolution. Waiting for the Revolution can be as intoxicating as waiting for one's lover."

Adopting the penname, Faiz, which can be best described to mean 'dedication to the service of his fellowmen', he revolutionised Urdu poetry. He relentlessly showed that the pen is mightier than the sword in rousing the people. Just one example of his work as a poet of the Revolution is his work known as *Hum Dekhengay (We Shall See)*.

We shall see,

It is certain that we shall see
The day for which there is a
promise,
The day recorded in the eternal
tablet,
When the weighty mountains of
cruelty and oppression
Shall be blown about like cotton-
wool;
When under the feet of the
oppressed ones
The earth shall shake noisily,
And over the heads of despotic
rulers
Thunder claps will burst ...
When the crowns will be
toppled,
When the palaces will be
demolished

His eternal humanism, which in the first place, led him to embrace Marxism and its world outlook, drove Faiz to espouse the cause of revolution all across the globe. He was a true internationalist.

In the book *Poetry East*, Carlo Coppola⁷ calls Faiz "a spokesperson for the world's voiceless and suffering peoples – whether Indians oppressed by the British in the '40s, freedom fighters in Africa, the Rosenbergs in cold war America in the '50s, Vietnamese peasants fleeing American napalm in the '60s, or

Palestinian children living in refugee camps in the 1970s".

Faiz travelled abroad widely, sometimes out of choice as the editor of the Afro-Asian literary magazine *Lotus*, published from Beirut. On some other occasions, he travelled abroad in exile.

Edward W Said described a meeting with Faiz:⁸ "To see a poet in exile – as opposed to reading the poetry of exile – is to see exile's antimonies embodied and endured. Several years ago, I spent some time with Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the greatest of contemporary Urdu poets. He had been exiled by Zia-ul-Haq's military regime and had found a welcome of sorts in the ruins of Beirut. His closest friends were Palestinian". Elsewhere, he commented:⁹ "The crucial thing to understand about Faiz is that like Garcia Marquez he was read and listened to both by the literary elite and by the masses His purity and precision were astonishing, and you must imagine therefore a poet whose poetry combined the sensuousness of Yeats with the power of Neruda. He was, I think, one of the greatest poets of this century."

Much has been written and will, indeed, be written in the future about the work of this socially committed literary genius and a dedicated communist. A particular lesson that every one of us who aspires for and works towards Revolution must learn is to combine the passion of commitment with creativity. Faiz did this with his poetry and mastered the use of classical forms, transforming them before his audience rather than breaking from the old forms. He makes you hear and recite his revolutionary message in the old and the new together and at once.

People's Democracy continues to draw inspiration from Faiz Ahmed Faiz's celebration of the idea of the Revolution.



GHAZAL

By Faiz Ahmed Faiz

I am being accused of loving
you, that is all
It is not an insult, but a
praise, that is all

My heart is pleased at the
words of the accusers
O my dearest dear, they say
your name, that is all

For what I am ridiculed, it is
not a crime
My heart's useless playtime, a
failed love, that is all

I haven't lost hope, but just a
fight, that is all
The night of suffering
lengthens, but just a night,
that is all

In the hand of time is not the
rolling of my fate
In the hand of time roll just
the days, that is all

A day will come for sure
when I will see the truth
My beautiful beloved is
behind a veil, that is all

The night is young, Faiz start
saying a Ghazal
A storm of emotions is
raging inside, that is all.

From
[http://www.faizcentenary.org/
poems_in_english.htm](http://www.faizcentenary.org/poems_in_english.htm), where
many more poems can be found.

Notes and References

- 1 *Kisan Sabha* = Peasants' Union –Ed.
- 2 Sajjad Zaheer (1905-73), renowned Urdu writer, Marxist thinker and revolutionary; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sajjad_Zaheer –Ed.
- 3 E Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism*, Little, Brown, 2011.
- 4 F A Faiz, *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.
- 5 *Ghazal*: an Arabic word that means "talking to women", and applied to a type of poetry developed in Persia in the 10th century AD, and brought into India with the Moghul invasion. It consists of 5-15 couplets, each of which should be a poem in itself. The link between the couplets is provided by the refrain, a repeated word at the end of both lines of the first couplet and the end of the second line of succeeding couplets. See <http://www.baymoon.com/~ariadne/form/ghazal.htm> –Ed.

- 6 Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775-1862), the last Moghul emperor of India, also a poet.
- 7 Carlo Coppola is emeritus professor of modern languages, literature and linguistics at Oakland University, California, and the author of *Marxist Influences and South Asian Literature* (South Asia Books, 1988). However, the specific title *Poetry East* has not been found –Ed.
- 8 E W Said, *The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile*, first published in *Harper's Magazine*, September 1984, pp 49-55 (see <http://www.scribd.com/doc/46534694/Mind-of-Winter-Reflection-on-Life-in-Exile-1984-Edward-Said>), later in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, 2000.
- 9 It has not been possible to trace the source –Ed.

Discussion: Draft Britain's Road to Socialism

WILL OUR RULING CLASS SPLIT?

By John Foster

A KEY issue for any strategic programme is to identify correctly the opposing class, its mode of operation, its weaknesses and its strengths. In our case this involves defining the current nature of monopoly capital and its relationship to capitalist state power.

Following Lenin, our party has always understood the post-1914 character of our ruling class to be defined as 'finance capital': the 'coalescence' of the economically dominant sectors of banking and industrial capital in conditions of monopoly capitalism and the increasing subordination of the capitalist state to its interests.¹ In this way the capitalist state becomes more and more the state 'of' finance capital rather than of the capitalist class as a whole. Hence, state monopoly capitalism (SMC). Hence, also the identification of a division of material interest between monopoly capital and non-monopoly capital on which the concept of an anti-monopoly alliance is based.

In the past attempts have been made to identify these divisions more concretely and also to show how finance capital controls and subordinates the capitalist state.² Today, after two decades of very considerable transformation, our programme needs to refresh this analysis and make it concrete in the new conditions. There would seem to be two key issues. One is the way in which monopoly or super-profit is now extracted and implications of this for the division of interests between finance capital and the rest of the capitalist class. The second is how far there are potential divisions of material interest *within* finance capital or, at a different level, the possibility of major differences of strategic assessment.

The purpose of this intervention is to initiate debate on these questions.

First, on the extraction of monopoly or super-profit. It is argued here that this now principally takes place by way of the

financial sector and is dependent on the control exercised by finance capital over and within the dominant monopolist sectors of productive capital.

This extraction of monopoly super-profit is of course dependent on, and subsidiary to, the basic process of capitalist exploitation, that is, the extraction of surplus value on which the whole system depends. Super-profit is about how finance capital extracts a disproportionate share of this surplus.

In the past this often depended more or less directly on the control by monopoly producers over materials such as oil or key technologies such as computer software or aspects of aerospace. This continues. But increasingly, it is argued, superprofit is extracted away from the productive process through the financial manipulation and control of these assets. In the original heroic age of monopoly capital, dynasties such as the Mellons and Rockefellers in the US or the Monds and Pearsons in Britain would dominate producer cartels and thereby also segments of banking. Today in Britain, it would seem that the process is far more parasitic.

The super-rich still exist. But they do so largely as rentiers increasing their wealth through the investment banks which in turn control the big joint stock companies that dominate our economy.³ These investment banks, many based in tax havens, own controlling blocks of shares and seek maximum short-term profit extraction – partly through dividend payments, partly through the speculative buying and selling of shareholdings and, most profitably, through buying and selling whole companies, mergers and acquisitions, taking them private or selling them on. They are able to do that at exceedingly high profit rates, largely through the use of leverage, that is, the short-term borrowing of capital at low interest rates from retail banking. This leveraged

capital is also used for other types of speculation (currencies, commodities, bonds and credit notes) and the credit itself ultimately derives from the savings of working people and small business deposited in the retail banks and insurance companies. Over the past two decades investment banks of one kind or another have regularly secured profits in excess of 15 per cent while small savers have been lucky to get a real return of 1 or 2 per cent (and often considerably less).

This particular way of extracting superprofit clearly deepens the gulf of material interest between non-monopoly capital and finance capital. Small and medium firms are still ripped off as suppliers, subcontractors and distributors for the monopoly companies but increasingly also suffer heavy costs for the supply of credit from retail banking and the impact of speculation-fed inflation. They also suffer from the more fundamental and connected process of the disproportionate decline of Britain's internal productive economy.

But how does this financialisation impact on the internal cohesion of finance capital itself? There are two possible types of conflict. One would be directly material. The other would be strategic – that is, differences among those occupying key leadership positions within SMC structures about what is best for finance capital as a whole. Material differences may underlie strategic differences but not necessarily or always. In the 1920s some big monopoly companies and associated banks focusing on internal markets – ICI, the Midland Bank, the motor industrial and electrical companies – do seem to have backed Keynesian style economic management against those banks and monopolies with interests concentrated in overseas markets and investment. But there were also strategic differences in the 1930s



over the attitudes to German imperialism which divided the politicians of the ruling class and which do not seem to have had this character. It would be difficult to say that Eden, Churchill or Macmillan represented a different fraction of finance capital compared to Chamberlain or Halifax. The conflict was more over differences of estimate about how far British state power could influence German state power. In the 1950s also there is evidence for a material base to the 'ultra imperialist' policies that led to Suez and seriously split the Conservative Party. Yet it is more difficult to identify a material base to differences of assessment over the wisdom of neo-liberal deregulation as adopted at the end of the 1970s. Differences there were. But they seem to have been strategic – about the risks attached to quite new and untried methods of rule.

So what is the case today? It is the argument here that finance capital is far more cohesive. A quite small grouping of financial institutions, around thirty major ones, dominate the big companies in the non-financial sector. Usually five or six investing companies will possess the controlling shareholdings in any one company. They may fight over detailed control – but not over the wider framework that allows them to control. The chief executives are their servants, mainly accountants and, if successful at boosting profits, will be promoted from company to company. Such managers will be expected to take what steps are necessary in any particular company to maximise income and to enter such wider lobbying arrangements that will defend the immediate profitability in the sector – for instance, companies in the retail trade or arms manufacturing. But they will have no authority of their own. Power will be held by the dominant shareholders. As banking institutions, their super-profitability depends on

leverage and the international status of the City of London and its dependencies as centres for deregulated financial trading. And these financial institutions in turn have to serve their clients, the super-rich, the approximately 30,000 British citizens with the minimum £3 million investible wealth required.

So, to sum up, it seems that today we are faced with an even more concentrated and cohesive finance capital nexus, representing a very small and largely rentier class, and exercising control through a quite narrow group of investment banks over the productive economy - doing so for short-term profit maximisation purposes that are often subordinated to more speculative activities elsewhere in the financial world.⁴

On this basis the key potential division of interest remains between finance capital and non-monopoly capital, itself very diverse, numerically running into millions of people and which for this reason is seen by finance capital as an essential base of political support. Yet the material interests of non-monopoly capital are much closer to those of the labour movement in terms of the defence of the productive economy and an end to finance capital's speculative manipulation of the banking system.

However, there may still be the potential for *strategic* fissures within British finance capital.

One of the unique features of the current stage in the development of state monopoly capitalism in Britain is the degree to which, since the early 1980s, British finance capital has benefited from the establishment of the City of London and its satellite dependencies as the *world* centre for deregulated banking and has done so principally on the back of US investment. Over a fifth of all US external investment is now located in Britain and its dependencies. As a percentage of GDP, total US investment amounts to *ten*

times that located in France, Germany or Japan. US capital is also increasingly dominant in the non-financial sector. If we look at the institutional shareholdings in British registered companies, the biggest are usually from US-owned investment banks, hedge funds and private equity investors.

This colonisation goes a long way to explain the close dependence of British governments on the US in terms of policy and the satellite role of Britain in both the EU and NATO. The penetration of policy-making circles by the spokespersons of US finance probably also explains why there has been so little concern at the quite disproportionate run-down of Britain's productive economy.

Yet differences of a strategic character may yet emerge as to the wisdom of this dependence.⁵ International pressures on the dollar are likely, sooner rather than later, to force US SMC strategists to rein in the speculative activities of US investment banks in London. US strategists are also likely, in order to strengthen the US balance of payments, to engage in a more vigorous promotion of US-owned transnationals in ways that could place them in more direct conflict with the few remaining British majors in oil, minerals and arms manufacture.

But this would be a *strategic* division among the leaders of SMC. We should not look to find material differences of interest within British finance capital on the basis of types of production or where investment is located. The way Britain's super-rich operate *through* investment banks means that conflicts are very unlikely on this basis. Financialisation strengthens coalescence.

The key division remains that between monopoly and non-monopoly capital. This is where more concrete analysis is required. This sector is very diverse. It is local. It is mainly located in



the productive economy broadly defined. And it is where the working class movement will need to intervene if it is to build an anti-monopoly alliance – even though *strategic* divisions of direction within the ruling SMC leaderships could make this process easier by dislocating control from above.

This is the argument here. If there is evidence to support a contrary reading it is very important that it is brought into the debate. It is essential that our strategic assumptions about the nature of the class enemy match current realities.

Notes and References

1 Lenin first used the term 'state monopoly capitalism' in April 1917 when referring to the evolution, under the impact of the war, of monopoly capitalism into state monopoly capitalism (see speeches and resolutions at the 7th (April) All-Russia Conference of the RSDLP(B) in *Collected Works*, Vol 24, pp 240, 305-6, 309-10). The concept was already implicit in *Imperialism*, written in January 1916, where he described the merger of bank and industrial monopoly, *ie* finance capital, as subordinating small and medium capitalists and throwing "a close network of dependence relationships over all the political and economic institutions of present day bourgeois society" (*Collected Works*, Vol 22, p 299). The 1960 meeting of Communist Parties defined state monopoly capitalism as follows: "In intensifying the grip of the monopolies over the life of the nation, state monopoly capitalism unites the power of the monopolies with the power of the state into a single mechanism for the salvation of the capitalist system, for maximum increases in profits for the imperialist bourgeoisie by exploitation of the working class and plundering the broad strata of the population" (reproduced at <http://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/evans/HIS242/Documents/1960ConferenceStatement.pdf>). See also *State Monopoly Capitalism*, Communist Party Central Education Department education syllabus 1971.

2 K Hood and J Harvey (Noreen Branson and Roger Simon), *The British State*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1958; S Aaronovitch, *Monopoly: A Study of British Monopoly Capitalism*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1955; and S Aaronovitch and M Sawyer, *Big Business*, Macmillan, 1975.

3 The sources for the argument that follows can be found in *The Politics of Britain's Economic Crisis* (CPB March 2011 edition).

4 Emmanuel Saez's analysis of the very rich in the US (those with the top 0.1 per cent of tax declared income) concludes that many are not rentier in the full sense and that they derive income as executives and bank officers. There has been no parallel research in Britain and it may well be that significant amounts of income derive from such sources – although it is likely that the majority of this will be via the financial sector; see E Saez, *Striking it Richer: the evolution of the top incomes in the United States*, July 2010 at <http://www.econ.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-USstopincomes-2008.pdf>.

5 SMC advisers such as Adair Turner and Will Hutton are already making such arguments – but with very little wider support: see A Turner, *The Crisis, Conventional Economic Wisdom and Public Policy*, in *Industrial and Corporate Change*, October 2010, Vol 19/5.

Discussion: Draft Britain's Road to Socialism

GENERAL CRISIS OF CAPITALISM

By Martin Levy

THE DRAFT *BRS* is generally good but has a few areas of weakness. In addressing these, I am aware that my comments will appear a bit disjointed. Some of them may even be overtaken by the Executive Committee's redraft, likely to be published at about the time that this issue of *CR* goes to press.

The first point that I want to draw out is that of the "general crisis of capitalism" (p 8 of the draft). In *Communists Today*,¹ Hans Heinz Holz comments that we need to distinguish the general crisis from the cyclical economic crises which have historically been an essential part of capitalism's development. What makes the crisis general is that capitalism's internal contradictions, which could at earlier stages be kept under control by increased productivity, have become so irreconcilable as to threaten humanity's conditions of existence.

Management of capitalism today requires institutions and instruments which are in contradiction with the nature of the system – *eg* intervention of central banks in the exchange markets, governments buying up major banks which are in negative

equity. The system can therefore no longer function according to its own structural laws, so it has become inherently unstable; but it keeps the appearance of stability by creating new contradictions – which, in the course of time, also prove destabilising. In this way, says Holz, capitalism can maintain itself for a long period, particularly if it has large reserves of social wealth. But, in the final analysis, it ends up shifting the costs of the crisis onto the weaker members of society, as we see in the current situation.

But this is only the basic, economic, aspect of the crisis. What also makes it general is the extension of the contradiction of production relations into all aspects of social life. Holz goes on to identify 6 major areas:

- the *political crisis* – reflected internally as a crisis of democracy (exclusion of people from key decision-making; widening of corruption etc) and externally as a crisis of peaceful coexistence;
- *social crisis* – growing unemployment, poverty, demoralisation of young people, increase of

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criminality and aggressiveness; we could add to that the growth of racist and fascist tendencies;

- *crisis of direction* – loosening of family and community links; no uniting general aims and expectations for the future; relative or sceptical pluralism; manipulation of consciousness instead of independent critical judgements; overall, we could say, a loss of hope;
- *educational and cultural crisis* – loss of connection with the cultural traditions through which society identifies itself; education being converted into mere addition of knowledge and becoming commodified;
- *crisis of technical resources* – we have the capability to satisfy our needs and organise our relationship with nature (*cf* hunger, lack of sanitation) but monopoly capitalism has different priorities, *eg* waste of resources on armaments;
- *the environmental crisis* – the threat of environmental catastrophe arising from uncontrolled economic growth in the interests of monopoly profits.

Thus the “contradictions” which are outlined on pp 6-8 of the draft are not accidental, but are all related to the fundamental economic aspect of the general crisis of capitalism.

The expression “general crisis of capitalism” seems to have been first used by Stalin in 1934,² describing it as the conditions “when capitalism no longer has, nor can have, either in the major countries or in the colonial and dependent countries, the strength and stability it had before the war and the October Revolution”.

The term however did not immediately take root in the communist vocabulary; and, when it did, it became, as Holz says, “a sort of magical spell, by which one sought to reassure oneself of the victory of socialism”, preventing what Lenin described as “the very gist, the living soul of Marxism – a concrete analysis of a concrete situation”.³ In particular, the existence of a substantial (and growing) socialist camp came to be regarded erroneously as an essentially determining factor in the general crisis of capitalism. And this leads me to the second issue I wish to draw out.

In the section of the draft, “The lessons of socialism”, I feel that insufficient weight is given to the dramatic achievements of socialism, while the blame for the collapse is placed exclusively on the “failure to mobilise the party, working class and the people to solve vital economic and political problems”, a situation implicitly deriving from the bureaucratic command system. This, of course, is the assessment reached by our Party in 1992.⁴ However, since then a number of detailed Marxist assessments have been made of the reasons for the collapse, notably those by Azad,⁵ Keeran and Kenny⁶ and Holz.^{7,8} It is not the

purpose of this contribution to discuss in detail these different assessments. But they all draw attention to the fact that the Soviet leadership after 1956 made major errors in Marxist theory.

Arguably the chief theoretical error was the false conclusion that the general crisis of capitalism also meant capitalism’s increasing weakness and collapse. But in addition – and perhaps flowing from it – there was an underestimation of the level of socialist development reached, and of the internal difficulties and contradictions in building socialism. The second error led in particular to:

- an emphasis on ‘catching up with the West’, i.e. consumerism, rather than building new human values and socialist consciousness;
- a neglect of the importance of working class leadership, and of creatively developing Marxist theory;
- utopian proclamations, for example that the USSR was already embarking on the transition from developed socialism to communism;
- and the increasing taking over by the Communist Party of the state administrative structure, so that the Party lost its leading role for activating the political engagement of the people.

In my view it is too simplistic to blame the collapse solely on the structures which had developed. Yes, they were a block on change and they led to exclusion of people from decision-making, but the theoretical failures were also important.

The third area I want to deal with is the Alternative Economic and Political Strategy. This phrase (or at least “alternative economic strategy”) remains within the

vocabulary of the labour movement, even if it is not used very frequently; but it tends to be regarded as a set of demands – like the People’s Charter or the Left-Wing Programme (LWP) – rather than the demands *and a strategy* for achieving them. The connection between winning support for a LWP, on the one hand, and the process for achieving a government of the Left, on the other, needs to be emphasised. In fact, the two are dialectically linked, because struggle on the issues of the day raises the question of the alternative that the labour movement needs, and also how that is to be achieved – through struggle, as well as through the ballot box. In addition the process whereby the LWP and the overall strategy is agreed needs to be addressed; communists of course will fight for it, but it is an issue for the Left as a whole. The LWP will have to be articulated, fought for, debated and adopted through all organisations of the trade union and progressive movements, at all levels, so that the programme becomes firmly routed as a strategic objective with mass active support.

Notes and References

- 1 H H Holz, *Communists Today*, Chapter 8, at <http://www.northerncommunists.org.uk/content/view/24/38>.
- 2 J V Stalin, *Collected Works*, Vol 13, pp 290-1; also *Leninism*, pp 471-2.
- 3 V I Lenin, *Kommunismus*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 31, p 166.
- 4 CPB Executive Committee, *Assessing the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, draft resolution for the reconvened National Congress, CR14, 1992, p 24.
- 5 B Azad, *Heroic Struggle, Bitter Defeat*, International Publishers, New York, 2000.
- 6 R Keeran and T Kenny, *Socialism Betrayed*, International Publishers, New York, 2004.
- 7 H H Holz, *The Downfall and Future of Socialism*, MEP Publications, Minneapolis, 1992.
- 8 H H Holz, *The Revisionist Turning-Point in CR52*, 2009, p 38.

Discussion: Draft Britain's Road to Socialism

TWO THEORETICAL WEAKNESSES

By Tom Burr

GAWAIN LITTLE'S article¹ kicking off the discussion on the latest draft of the *BRS* is useful in that it highlights what have always been the two main theoretical weaknesses of this and previous editions.

Firstly, Gawain spends some time defining 'class' and from that the nature of alliances. However he and the *BRS* base their analysis on a quite erroneous definition of 'working class'. He quotes the *Communist Manifesto* which describes society "splitting up into two great hostile camps ... Bourgeoisie and Proletariat".² The 'proletariat' for Marx was those workers who man the factories and distribution systems and stand in direct opposition to their exploiters, the capitalists. It is only they that will see clearly that to end their misery they must put an end to capitalism. Marx did not include all those, probably forming the majority of the population, who depended, in part or in full, on a wage, salary or fee for their living, but who were not directly involved in the production process, producing surplus value.

In Britain, except for a short period when the industrial working class formed a numerical majority, both capitalists and workers have been in a minority. To prevail, both classes must look for support from sections of the 'silent majority', plus groups such as small businesses. Broadening our traditional definition of working class or proletariat to what amounts to probably 90% of the population, including public sector workers, students, lecturers, city workers etc, leads to confusion and lack of clarity on day-to-day issues.

Our Party has been unable to formulate a coherent position with regard to the Labour Party, sometimes seeking to destroy it and at other times defining it as 'the mass party of the working class'. We do not know why we stand in elections, and cannot explain why we do so badly, when objective conditions appear to be in our favour. Instead of having our own clear

long-term view we have tended to jump on the latest bandwagon, sometimes dabbling with the Trotskyite left and at other times getting into bed with the soft left. By behaving in this way we forfeit our right to any claim of leadership.

Today it is difficult to find a single production worker among the membership of our party. A communist party, to be a communist party, must draw its membership from the industrial working class and present its policies as the representative of that class with broad non-socialist proposals clearly designed to draw other sections of the population into cooperation and allegiance without watering down or disguising our long-term aims.

The second weakness of Gawain's article and the *BRS* – and possibly the more important one – is that both present roads to socialism ignoring the real world.

There is no longer the prospect of a socialist Britain receiving protection and assistance from an existing socialist bloc, and it is impossible to conceive of Britain going it alone to socialism. Any road to socialism in Britain can only be as part of a wider, possibly worldwide, movement; and, because of the class make-up in Britain, it is possible that we shall have to wait till the end of a world-wide revolutionary process before we get our socialism.

Today the industrial base has shrunk, with vast numbers of wage-earners now employed assisting, in one way or another, the capitalist class in the plunder of the Third World. All these workers can be won for better schools, hospitals, services, peace etc, but in the event of a socialist revolution they would lose their jobs and suffer horribly – and they therefore have a vested interest in maintaining the capitalist system. At a time of confrontation they are likely to back off and opt for the preservation of the status quo.

So what are the prospects for revolution?

This century is likely to see an ever-increasing number of wars of 'moral intervention', as capitalism seeks to preserve its control of the resources of the Third World. Inter-imperialist rivalry will develop as the US tries to take advantage of its military might at the expense of its rivals, opening the prospect of isolating the US and making it a pariah state. Tension will develop with the 'new kids on the block' – the BRICs countries. We can expect to see an increased militarisation of our country, with an expansion of the army, as imperialism is forced to garrison the countries that at the moment it believes it can control with 'shock and awe'.

There will be pressure on the standard of living as British workers are faced with competition from the Third World and from immigrant workers, and that will result in an increased use of racism to divide the population. The gap in incomes will continue to widen and an underclass of permanently unemployed will emerge. It will become increasingly difficult for capitalism to avoid stagnation by maintaining spending, and finding markets for its expanding number of products will become an increasing problem.

Bourgeois democracy will face a crisis as public participation continues to decline and it is likely that measures such as funding of registered parties and proportional representation will be introduced to maintain the illusion of choice.

Whilst not spurning individual opportunities, if they arise, we should recognise that crises and breakthroughs are more likely to occur in groups of countries. Hence our outlook should become more internationalist. It is possible to see groups of countries in Latin American, Africa or even in the EU acting together to defend their interests



and we must be prepared to place much greater emphasis on the peace movement to thwart imperialism's aims. Prospects for socialism in Britain are now much more likely to arise as the result of a general crisis in Europe or possibly the whole world.

We should try to live up to Marx's definition of communists that "they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole",³ and accept that our part in the world revolutionary process may be helping others to make their revolution.

We must raise the heat in the ideological battle, directly challenging bourgeois concepts of freedom, human rights and particularly the definition of democracy as voting in multi-party elections.

At home the Party must seek to become the party of the industrial working class, with the majority of its members drawn from that class, and to follow Lenin's advice, working for unity within the broader labour movement by seeking affiliation to the Labour Party.

In the past much of the debate around the *BRS* has been as to whether it is 'revisionist' but while that debate has been going on the world has been changing and the concept of a British road, revisionist or not, is no longer credible.

We must start again looking first at the world of imperialism and the particular position that British capitalism and its proletariat has in the world, and from that devise strategies that can best benefit the British working class and the movement as a whole.

Notes and References

1 G Little, *New Draft of Britain's Road to Socialism*, in *CR59*, Winter 2011, p 20.

2 K Marx and F Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 6, p 485.

3 *Ibid*, p 497.

Letter to the Editor

From Phil Clegg

KEN FULLER (*CR59*, pp 30-31) says that the politics of Che Guevara were ultra-leftist but, unless he is saying that the successful Cuban Revolution was an 'ultra-leftist revolution', the accusation is vague to the point of meaninglessness. Surely, the accusation of ultra-leftism begs a number of questions: in relation to what policy, what moment in time, what political circumstances, what alternative points of view?

The author outlines various instances in which Che took an interest in the works of Trotsky: how he asked someone to find a book of Trotsky's thought, how he took one of Trotsky's books to Bolivia, and how he tried to persuade someone to read Trotsky! Mon Dieu! We should all be tearing out our hair. The whole thing would be laughable if it was not such a disgrace in a theoretical journal. The biggest disgrace, however, is that despite the fact that Che's own writings are freely available, the author uses only secondary sources (mostly a book by J L Anderson) for his article and cites not one work of Che's. Thus he quotes a warning by Nasser to Che about his expedition to the Congo but ignores the fact that Che actually wrote a book on his experiences, a critical account which had deep implications for Cuban attitudes towards the struggle in Africa. The author cuts and pastes various other details to complete his picture: an insinuation about Che's relationship with his wife, a photograph which "speaks volumes", an uncontested comment by the late Sam Russell on Che's mental stability. I believe the latter comrade, although having done stalwart service in Spain, became a Blairite: would we call him a 'Right deviationist'? I think that we have given up that sort of language, at least.



Discussion: MACHISMO versus MARXISM

A response to Ken Fuller by Roger Fletcher



IT IS WELL observed that 'idols have feet of clay', and our movement has many 'idols' who, in one respect or several, fit more or less that description. And one revolution that has been quite circumspect in avoiding the creation of idols has been the Cuban one. That has been a conscious and declared position of the Revolution since January 1959.

That said, the image of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, taken following the explosion of La Coubre in Havana harbour, has become an icon in itself, and has adorned a million T-shirts and a thousand student militants' walls. Along with memoirs of Celia, Haydee and Camilo, Che is honoured every day throughout Cuba. Unfortunately Che's writings, what the man actually said, are far less well-known outside Cuba, and many have become distorted through passage of time ... and the calculated efforts of imperialist detractors. I have even been asked, referring to Che's image on my neck-tie, why I carried an image of Bob Marley!

I am not for one moment suggesting that Comrade Ken Fuller's contribution¹ comes near to that latter category. But since it is the steady maturation of the Cuban revolution that is causing so much 'grief' to the world pivot of imperialism, I suggest that we judge Che not from today's understandings, but from his own times. It is hardly deniable that the revolution created by those heroes mentioned above, and by many unnamed thousands, is restoring the validity of socialism that had become 'slightly tarnished' during the 20th century.

Fidel, in his *My Life*,² was asked by Ignacio Ramonet, "What political leader do you remember ... who's made the greatest impression on

you?" With almost no hesitation, Fidel replied "Che — I always remember him as one of the most extraordinary personalities I've ever known ... one of the noblest ... most disinterested men ...". That is quite a ringing endorsement of another person, especially from a background as eventful, and heroic, as Fidel's.

Che's life, however brief, spanned a complex period of class struggle, and it is understandable that he should have had a working knowledge of Trotsky's work; after all the Cuban revolutionaries had to seek refuge in the country that had also provided a bolt-hole for Trotsky and his disparate ménage.

Following the 1959 triumph of the Cuban Revolution, the stabilisation in hazardous conditions, and his exemplary work in that foundation, Che went on one of his famous tours. Of his visit to the Soviet Union, Che commented to the effect that if the labour relations then existing there "persisted, then the Soviet Union would revert to capitalism". Many of us [including myself —RF] thought then that that was 'pure' Trotskyism, but we all know the dreadful reality of Che's foresight today! Perhaps some of us can recognise that his judgement was based on economic realities, rather than the supine acceptance of a self-serving theoretician.

To interface with ultra-left dogma was most probably an essential part of Che's development. After all, the Partido Socialista Popular [PSP], or Cuban Communist Party in pre-revolutionary Cuba had, since at least 1938, been closely associated with Fulgencio Batista and thus was totally incapable of leading the Cuban people. That accounts for the post-revolutionary reformation of the Communist Party of Cuba. Whilst

the PSP had contained many sound elements, its leader Anibal Escalante was ignominiously expelled, and for some time found refuge in the Soviet Union. This latter fact alone could have given Che good reason to re-examine the writings of that other 'prophet expelled'!

As to the undoubted 'machismo' of which comrade Ken correctly writes, an attitude which still afflicts some in our own movement, this should now be seen as an anachronism, as it is in 21st century Cuba. But in a country, and indeed continent, that was still in the ideological grip of imperialism, machismo was an essential part of that ideology, of 'divide and rule'.

Perhaps, in light of both the practical and theoretical difficulties that have destroyed the 'socialist sixth of the world', we should consider afresh the words of Che himself. In *Notes for the Study of the Ideology of the Cuban Revolution*,³ he writes "There are truths so evident, so much a part of people's knowledge, that it is now useless to discuss them. One ought to be 'Marxist' with the same naturalness with which one is 'Newtonian' in physics or 'Pasteurian' in biology, considering that if facts determine new concepts, these new concepts will never divest themselves of that portion of truth possessed by the older concepts they have outdated. Such is the case ... of Einsteinian relativity or of Planck's quantum theory ... with respect to Newton; they take nothing away from the greatness of the learned Englishman The learned Englishman provided the necessary stepping stone for them."

As we know from the implosion of the Soviet Union, nothing in life is certain, and it is just conceivable that

ideological problems will tear Cuba to pieces. But the reality of the society that Che played an honourable part in establishing is that it is setting new standards for progressive humanity, and the pace of that development is breathtaking. Armando Hart in *Manifesto*⁴ writes that "following Lenin's death, the essential principles of Marx and Lenin have been adulterated, whittled away. Humanity cannot advance toward a new type of thinking in the 21st century if the essence of the works of these geniuses is not clarified". And, judging from the 'raspberry' that Gorbachev got when he visited Cuba, that society has a very different conception of 'a new type of thinking' to the fantasies of Gorbachev.

Recently, Cuba's Ricardo Alarcon pointed out that Cuba has 243 years of experience of struggle against imperialism,⁵ which actually challenges that of the Soviet Union. We could do far worse than study what Che and his comrades achieved in their 'shotgun marriage' of theory and practice. An examination of what they have said and done is a more reliable guide to social progress than the oft-cited work of, for example, the J Lee Anderson so-frequently quoted by comrade Ken.

Notes

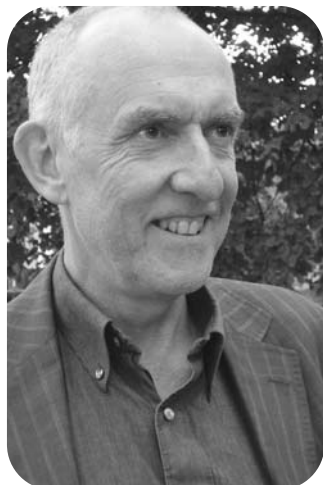
1 K Fuller, *Machismo, not Marxism: a Second Look at Che*, in *CRS9*, Winter 2011, pp 30-31.

2 F Castro with I Ramonet, *My Life*, Penguin /Allen Lane, London, 2007, p 591.

3 E Guevara, *Notes for the Study of the Ideology of the Cuban Revolution*, in *The Marxists*, C Wright Mills ed, Pelican Books, 1963, p 437ff.

4 A Hart ed, *Manifesto, Three Classic Essays on How to Change the World*, Ocean Press, Melbourne/New York, 2005, p 10.

5 R Alarcón de Quesada, *To Vindicate Cuba*, in *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, Vol 2, Nos 1 & 2, Spring /Summer 2010, p 21.



SOULFOOD

A regular literary selection

Selected by Mike Quille

Let us start with a poem about a Chartist activist, Elizabeth Pease, which was sent in by the poet Sheree Mack:

**Breaking Dawn
For Elizabeth Pease**
by Sheree Mack

The gas lights glow. The trees crack
like whips; only you and the
blackbirds are awake.
Others lie still, their breath
comes and goes.
Under threadbare blankets,
bodies jammed into damp rooms,
away from
the harsh world, tired minds,
at peace,
dream of better times, in sleep.

You dream with your eyes open,
for those who've struggled for
generations
within the night underground and
above
within mill upon mill. Men,
women and children
condemned to live caged lives,
like caught fish thrashing in nets.
Even they are at rest, for this
moment.

But soon the cramped terraces
begin to smoke.
The women are up, saying
goodbye to the moon,
and the sirens are screaming.
This is the hour of cold, cold
to bones,
stone cold. But there is a spark
of heat,
you and others fan the flames
as the workforce wakes up to act.

Down at the docks, the black
water swills,
as the winds blow in seeds of
change
to agitate these city walls. You,
supposed
to be an ornament of the
domestic hearth,
add spirit to the movement. For
some, seen
as vulgar and ungentle, you are a
white swan,
gliding far out yet glimmering in
the dawn light.

In the last *Soul Food* column I said I would present some Chartist poems, and asked readers for their own poems, to go alongside the Chartist 'originals'. At the time of writing this article, it has only been a few weeks since *CR59* appeared in print, so readers and writers haven't had a great deal of time to respond. And I still have one or two good 'Brechtian' poems from readers, following the article in *CR58*, to present.

So the timing has made it difficult for readers. We clearly need to plan the themes more in advance, to give you the time to think, imagine, and create. At the end of this article I'll set out a few possible themes for future *Soul Food* columns. In one of his recent *Morning Star* poetry features, Andy Croft, author of the article on the poet Yannis Ritsos in the last issue of *CR*,¹ has also given some publicity to the effort to attract new poems. So hopefully I shall eventually be in the enviable position of the editor of the *Northern Star* in 1838, who was inundated by poetry from his Chartist readers. And also hopefully avoid his rather irritable manner:

"We get Rhymes of a most
rubbishly description by the
score. We cannot pretend to
enumerate them. We shall select,
from time to time, such as we
think are worth publishing, and
burn the rest."²

Fortunately, Sheree's poem was submitted in time to print it. It is excellent, is it not? The first few verses richly evoke the exploitation of the working class in the early years of the Industrial Revolution. Then, as dawn breaks and "the workforce wakes up to act", the poem moves on to expressing a more complex set of ideas about the perceived status of women in a class-ridden society. It expresses the contradictions between their allotted role in bourgeois society, as "an ornament of the domestic hearth", and the developing, politically conscious role as they "fan the flames", both literally as workers in the domestic mode of production, but also metaphorically as they "add spirit to the movement".

Adding spirit to the movement, or "the ideological and cultural struggle" in the less poetical formulation in *Britain's Road to Socialism*,³ is also a very apt description of the role of poetry in the Chartist movement. That is why Sheree's poem has pride of place in this article. I had planned to start with a brief summary of Chartism, the place of poetry in the movement, and then introduce some examples of Chartist poetry before presenting readers' poems. But leaving this excellent poem until the end would be like having Lenin speak at the end of a meeting!



Chartism

Chartism was the first mass working class movement in Britain, if not the world. It was a movement for radical social and political reform, based on a People's Charter. This included demands for: a vote for every man, regardless of property ownership; voting by secret ballot; no property qualification for MPs; payment for MPs; equal constituencies; and annual parliaments.

There was huge popular support and a wide range of demonstrations in support of the Charter, between the late 1830s and the 1850s. There were many mass mobilisations and demonstrations, violent insurrections such as the Newport Rising in 1839, and petitions to Parliament with signatures numbering as many as one sixth of all adults in the country. It was not until 1918 that most of the Charter's demands were met, however. Other Chartist aims, such as free, universal education under the democratic control of local communities, and financial support for unemployed workers, were not achieved until the modern welfare state was built, in the 1940s.

Chartism arose and grew quickly because of the dire economic conditions in which the early British working class laboured. These included: the harsh and unmoderated boom-bust cycles of capitalist economic activity; long working hours with little rest or holiday; the erosion of craft-based work and the introduction of disciplined factory work; the increased employment of women and children; a growing gap between the rich and the poor; and the degradation of the lived environment, particularly terrible housing conditions.⁴

The Chartists were the only national group with which Karl Marx had any prolonged contact.⁵ Through correspondence and meetings, he supported and helped strengthen those strands of Chartism which rejected class collaboration, emphasised the fundamental division between capital and labour, and promoted the need for the conquest of political power by the organised working class.

Unfortunately, as Marx realised, a truly politicised class consciousness was not widespread in the movement, and certainly not in the leadership. Consequently, there was a fragmentation and diffusion of the Chartist struggle into various progressive but limited movements: for the advancement of trade unions but not for a challenge to capitalism; for self-help and mutual aid societies for workers but not for the



Chartist leader Ernest Jones

unemployed; and for industrial struggle on behalf of the (mostly male) breadwinners but not a wider political and social struggle to benefit women like Elizabeth Pease.

Marx's main Chartist correspondent was Ernest Jones, a leader of the Chartist left and an accomplished poet. Here is one of his poems, which expresses the insight into economic exploitation and class struggle very simply and powerfully, through its directive rhetoric and contrasting, oppositional phrases and figures of speech.

A Chartist Chorus by Ernest Jones

Go! cotton lords and corn
lords, go!
Go! Ye live on loom and acre,
But let be seen – some law
between
The giver and the taker.

Go! Treasure well your
miser's store
With crown, and cross, and sabre!
Despite you all – we'll break
your thrall,
And have our land and labour.

You forge no more – you fold
no more
Your cankering chains about us;
We heed you not – we need
you not,

But you can't do without us.

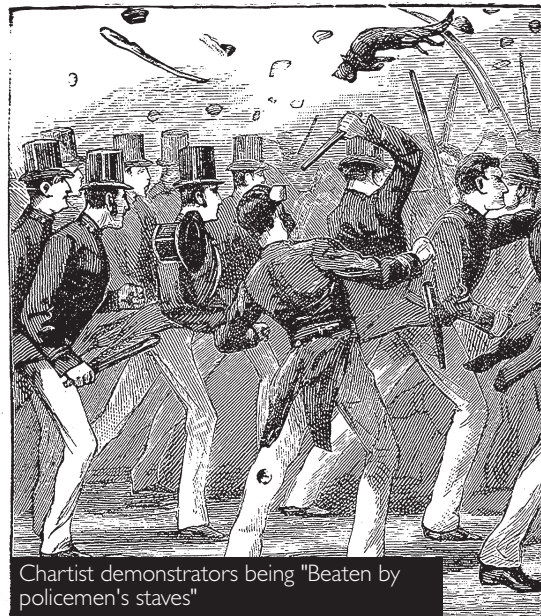
You've lagged too long, the tide
has turned,
Your helmsmen all were knavish;
And now we'll be – as bold
and free,
As we've been tame and slavish.

Our lives are not your sheaves
to glean –
Our rights your bales to barter:
Give all their own – from cot
to throne,
But ours shall be THE CHARTER!

Chartism and poetry

The integration of political and economic fronts in the class struggle that the radical strands of Chartism stood for also included cultural struggle. Chartist poems were written and read as arising from, and part of, the wider political struggle. It was "a literature which existed not only on the page as a literary text, but also a social event and public demonstration."⁶

The main Chartist newspaper, called the *Northern Star*, contained a poetry column which not only published poems by Shelley, Byron, Milton, Burns and other great anti-establishment poets, but also by its own working class readership. These would have been read aloud (as was the whole newspaper usually), in a whole range of social environments, including the alehouses, the open-air meetings, the workplace lunches, and the spirited, defiant singing in prisons. This mode of expression was itself an act of defiance and subversion of the



Chartist demonstrators being "Beaten by policemen's staves"

dominant bourgeois code of private and domestic consumption of literature.

Many of the poems reflect and advance the struggle against class domination through a rhetoric of irony, reversal and inversion of meaning. Here's an example:

British Freedom

by David Wright

"Are not the people free?" – Pitt

Yes, we are free! to plough
the sea,
And dig the earth for treasure,
And when we do, the ruling few
Can take our gains at leisure.

We're free to fight with all
our might,
In every Whiggish battle,
And when we do, the ruling few,
Treat us like slaves or cattle.

And free we're born, to sow
the corn,
And free, when ripe, to reap it,
And when we do, the ruling few,
Are free to come and eat it.

We're free to weep, when
tyrants sleep,
And starve when they are
feasting,
And when we do, the ruling few,
Feed us with scorn and jesting.

We pay the tax, laid on our backs,
And seldom try to stop it;
And when we do, the ruling few,
Can take by force, and pocket.

And thus you see, that we
are free,
To labour for starvation;
Because they take all that
we make,
To pay their d—d taxation.

Another common approach was the use of what might be called an ancient 'bardic' or religious voice and vocabulary. These are public poems, meant to give insight and at the same time inspire the reader with faith, courage and hope. Here's one, by Benjamin Stott:

Song for the Millions

by Benjamin Stott

Beware! ye white slaves of old
England, beware!
Your dastard oppressors are
fiendish and base;
Their spies are abroad, to betray
and ensnare –
To bring you to ruin, to death, and
disgrace.

They are thirsting for blood, and
impatience to spoil
The prospects of freedom which
all now enjoy;
They have soldiers to crush you
who live by your toil,
Then beware of the infamous
traitor and spy!

Be firm and unite, but be cautious
in words,
On your prudence depends the
success of your cause:
Remember, policemen have
bludgeons and swords,
And unjust protection from
despotic laws.
The press is corrupt, and knaves
they can find
Who will perjure their souls, and
swear truth is a lie,
Then, producers of wealth, be not
wilfully blind,
But beware of the infamous
traitor and spy!

'Tis true that your sufferings are
grievous and great,
And death, from starvation, you
constantly fear;
While a proud, pampered
priesthood would teach you
to wait
For that comfort in heaven they
rob you of here.
'Tis true ye are goaded by insult
and wrong,
But justice will come; be united
and wise;

The weak shall not ever be slaves
to the strong;
Then beware of the tyrants, their
traitors, and spies!

Celestial freedom! The birthright
of all,
Inert in our bosoms, inhaled by
our breath;
Thy spirit abhors both oppression
and thrall,
We still live in hope for thee even
to death.
Oh! Let thy bright presence
enliven our land;
The free-born will despots and
dungeons despise;
They will purge the fair earth
from slavery's brand,
And exterminate tyrants, and
traitors, and spies!

Clearly police spies are not a modern phenomenon!

Chartist Hymns

The use of a prophetic and biblical rhetoric, calling on God to intervene on the side of the poor and avenge injustice and exploitation, is most evident in Chartist hymns. While researching this article, I came across the news that a book of these hymns had been discovered in Todmorden public library, by Dr Mike Sanders, a lecturer at Manchester University and the author of one of the books I consulted about Chartist poetry (see Acknowledgements below).

The hymn book has been digitised and can be viewed at <http://www.calderdale.gov.uk/wtw/search/controlervlet?PageId=Detail&DocId=102253>. Here is one of the hymns, based on a poem by William Sankey:

Hymn Fifth

Men of England, ye are slaves,
Bought by tyrants, sold by knaves;
Yours the toil, the sweat, the pain,
Theirs the profit, ease and gain.

Men of England, ye are slaves;
Beaten by policemen's staves;
If their force ye dare repel,
Yours will be the felon's cell.

Men of England, ye are slaves;—
Hark, the stormy tempest raves—
'Tis the nation's voice I hear,
Shouting, "Liberty is near!"

The reference to being "Beaten by policemen's staves" will no doubt ring



bells with those caught in the police 'kettle' in Trafalgar Square on March 26th, not to mention the students protesting about tuition fees last November and December. *Plus ça change*

Chartism and Internationalism

The last Chartist poem in this selection, by the same author, illustrates the internationalist and anti-imperialist flavour of left Chartism:

To Working Men of Every Clime

by William Sankey

Working men of every clime,
Gather still, but bide your time,
Bide your time, and wait a wee,
Yours will be the victory.

Britain's sons, whose constant toil
Plies the loom and tills the soil,
Lift the voice for liberty,
Yours will be the victory.

Toil-worn sons of Spain advance,
Give the hand to those of France,
Join you both with Italy,
Yours will be the victory.

Serfs of Poland, gather near,
Raise, with Austria's sons, the cheer,
Echo'd far through Germany,
Yours will be the victory.

Danish workmen, hear the cry,
Scandinavia's quick reply,
Workmen, 'panting to be free',
Yours will be the victory.

Dutchmen, linger not behind,
Working men should be combined,
Russian slaves themselves will see

Yours will be the victory.

Europe's workmen, one and all,
Rouse ye at your brethren's call,
Shouting loud from sea to sea,
Yours will be the victory.

Kings and nobles may conspire,
God will pour on them his ire;
Workmen shout, for ye are free,
Yours is now the victory.

Next Steps

Finally, a few words about future *Soul Food* columns. We want to encourage CR readers, and politically committed poets and writers anywhere, to send in original poetry for publication. It would be good if they could be grouped around particular themes. For this to work, there needs to be some choice and flexibility as to the theme, a fairly loose definition of what a political poem is, and above all enough time for readers to respond. Here are some suggestions:

- we continue with the themes of poems inspired by Brecht, and poems inspired by Chartism and the People's Charter;
- we look at the new version of *Britain's Road to Socialism*, especially the sections in it relating to art and culture, and seek to publish poems about how poetry relates to the class struggle;
- we consider the topic of the English Revolution, both the one in the seventeenth century and the next one, and write poems about one or the other or both;
- we present some poems about the criminal justice system, about the courts, the probation service and life in prison;

- and finally we keep in mind all the time topical events, eg campaigns against the cuts; the political upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East; the ongoing economic crisis of capitalism etc etc.

This list of possible themes isn't exhaustive, however. Please feel free to send in good political poems on any subject, and make suggestions for future articles (I've received one suggestion for an article on right-wing political poetry!) Email address is artseditor@communistreview.org.uk

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Sheree Mack for the opening poem.

The Chartist poems are all taken from Peter Scheckner, *An Anthology of Chartist Poetry: Poetry of the British Working Class, 1830s – 1850s*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 1989. For readers interested in finding out more about Chartist poetry, I recommend this book and *The Poetry of Chartism* by Mike Sanders, CUP 2009.

Notes and References

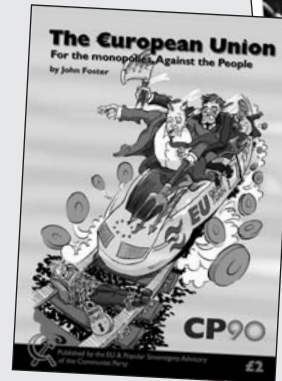
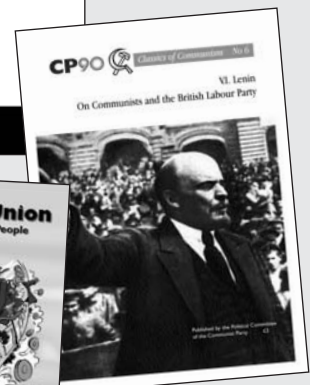
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- 4 M Chase, *Chartism: A New History*, Manchester University Press, 2007, pp 20-22.
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