



COMMUNIST REVIEW

- **Zoltan Zigedy** The New Imperialism
- **Albano Nunes** Latin America and Revolutionary Developments
- **Thomas Wagner** Oppression and Freedom in the Old Testament, Part 2
- **Dyal Bagri** Class Struggle vs Caste System in Britain
- plus book reviews and Soul Food



The 'New' Imperialism

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THE 'NEW' IMPERIALISM

by Zoltan Zigedy Page 2

- | **Editorial** by Martin Levy

- 10 **Latin America, Revolutionary Developments and Challenges** by Albano Nunes

- 14 **Oppression and Freedom in the Old Testament, Part 2**
by Thomas Wagner

- 21 **The Class Struggle versus the Caste System in India and Britain** by Dyal Bagri

- Book Reviews:**

- 24 **Losurdo on Stalin: A Review**
review by Roland Boer

- 27 **A Valuable Book on Economics**
review by Lars Ulrik Thomsen

- 28 **Enveloping the Core of Marx's Work in a Degree of Mist**
review by John Ellison

- 32 **Plugging an Important Gap for Studies of Gramsci** review by Martin Levy

- 34 **Soul Food** by Mike Quille

- 37 **Letter to the Editor**

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contributors

DYAL BAGRI is national president of the Indian Workers' Association (GB).

ROLAND BOER directs the Religion, Marxism and Secularism project at the University of Newcastle, NSW, and writes, "with a passion for Marxism and religion" at the iconoclastic blogspot *Stalin's Moustache*.

JOHN ELLISON is a semi-retired child care solicitor, with a special interest in 1930s British socialist movement history.

MARTIN LEVY is editor of *Communist Review*.

ALBANO NUNES is a member of the secretariat of the central committee of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP).

MIKE QUILLE is a writer living on Tyneside, and is arts editor of *Communist Review*.

LARS ULRIK THOMSEN is a mechanic by profession and a member of the Communist Party of Denmark since 1971.

THOMAS WAGNER is a sociologist and political journalist, who works as literary editor of the daily newspaper *Junge Welt* in Berlin. He has contributed to the *Historisch-Kritische-Wörterbuch des Marxismus* as well as being the author of several published books.

ZOLTAN ZIGEDY is the *nom de plume* of a US based activist in the communist movement who left the academic world many years ago with an uncompleted PhD thesis in philosophy. He writes regularly at *ZZ's blog*, and on *Marxist-Leninism Today*. His writings have been published in Cuba, Greece, Italy, Canada, UK, Argentina and Ukraine.



editorial



By Martin Levy

BRITAIN'S LABOUR movement is on the back foot. The Tory victory in the general election, albeit achieved with only 24% support from registered voters, has opened the door to an even more massive onslaught on the working class than during the 5 years of the ConDem coalition. Government plans mean that public services will be slashed even further, essential benefits will be axed, the privatisation of the National Health Service will continue apace, trade union rights will be near abolished and there will be yet more dangerous overseas military adventures.

Introspection is a natural response to a defeat such as that sustained by Labour. But it is of little use if it paralyses activity and does not ask the correct questions. How, for example, could the Conservatives win the general election when public opinion is well to the left of them on many issues? A 2015 pre-election post¹ reported that:

- 56% of the public favour a more equal distribution of wealth;
- capitalism is more likely to be regarded by the public as a force for ill than a force for good;
- there is widespread public support, across supporters of all major parties, for an “immediate” and “substantial” increase in the national minimum wage; and
- around 3 to 1 support nationalisation of both energy and rail.

Against that, however, 56% were reported to want immigration to be “reduced a lot” and 80% consider crime laws to be “too lenient”.

And there's the rub. Right-wing media sensationalism is able to fan fears about the latter issues and thereby divert attention from the other, more central, ones. It will not be possible to overcome that diversion by playing the right-wing game, but rather by challenging the fundamental causes. While racism and xenophobia do find a resonance among some sections of the working class, fears over immigration are predominantly over threats to job opportunities, pay rates and access to decent housing and public services, in these times of economic

hardship, and in the context of the ‘free movement’ of labour and capital in the European Union (EU). And, while working people do deserve protection from crime, that protection must also be against mass redundancies, tax avoidance and asset stripping by big corporations – actions which are not yet criminal but must be made so.

The labour movement will have to campaign, educate, organise and fight as never before. Not only must this reactionary government be driven out of office; but it must be replaced by one which, with mass support, starts to make inroads into the power and wealth of the monopoly capitalist class. Struggle, combined with political education, must lead to the development of *educated class consciousness*.

As part of that, the labour movement must develop a clearer understanding of modern-day imperialism. As Zoltan Zigedy writes in our feature article here, the ‘new’ imperialism is not so different from the ‘old’. Monopoly and finance capital dominate the economy, export of capital remains a primary aim and war is the constant companion as corporations and nation-states vie for protected spheres of influence. While the article mostly focuses on US imperialism, British imperialism remains allied to that; and the EU, of which Britain is a part, is a supranational imperialist institution, seeking to advance the interests of European transnational corporations, to the detriment of workers within the EU and without. There is a coherent case for an ‘exit left’ from the EU.

As Zigedy shows, US imperialism is not all-powerful. His characterisation of some forces – including militant Islamic fundamentalism – as objectively anti-imperialist may raise some eyebrows, but we can all agree with him that there is at least a strong anti-imperialist trend in Central and South America. This is a topic developed in more detail by Albano Nunes in the second article in this *CR*, where he examines the revolutionary developments in Latin America but also points to limits, contradictions and threats. He cites in particular the powerful influence of big capital over

the economy, state apparatus, structures of ideological reproduction and the armed forces but concludes that “there are great opportunities for progressive and revolutionary transformations”. This should encourage us fighting for socialism here in Britain.

Part 2 of Thomas Wagner's *Oppression and Freedom in the Old Testament* appears as a complete contrast. However, it raises important issues about whether religious violence – Islamic or any other fundamentalism – derives from the belief in a single god or from the institutionalising of religion as part of state rule. Wagner suggests that Christians and Marxists might share a practical desire to overcome existing power relations, but with differently-based subjective confidences that this is possible. Certainly there have been many religious movements – including liberation theology in Latin America – that have based their arguments for social justice on the scriptures. As Wagner shows, there is also a trend of criticising religion from the right, alleging a ‘Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy’ – a trend going back to Friedrich Nietzsche, criticised in turn by Domenico Losurdo for “transversal racialisation”, directed towards the lower strata of the population.

The theme of discrimination continues in Dyal Bagri's article on class and caste in India and Britain. He points out that, while capitalism generally requires the weakening of semi-feudal conditions, the Indian bourgeoisie has used the caste and class systems for dual exploitation of working people and that these semi-feudal values have been imported into Indian communities in Britain.

We conclude this issue with four book reviews – three of them more extensive than usual, and in one of which Domenico Losurdo appears again – plus the excellent Soul Food and a Letter to the Editor.

Notes and References

¹ *How far is public opinion from the political centre ground?*, at <http://journalismfrommars.co.uk/2015/01/26/how-far-is-public-opinion-from-the-political-centre-ground/>.

The 'New' Imperialism

By Zoltan Zigedy

Imperialism, expressed as a nation's securing economic dominance of, influence over, or advantage from other nations, remains much as Lenin characterised it in his 1916 pamphlet, *Imperialism*. Its uninterrupted persistence, from the time well before the pamphlet's publication up to today, certainly supports the claim that it constitutes the "highest stage of capitalism". Its basic features, as outlined by Lenin, have remained the same over a century: monopoly capital serves as its economic base; it supports a profound and growing role for finance capital; and the export of capital to foreign lands continues as a primary aim. Corporations spread their tentacles to every inhabitable area of the world and nation-states vie to encase those areas in their protected spheres of influence. War is the constant companion to imperialism.

While the character and grand strategy of imperialism have never changed, the tactics have evolved and shifted to adjust to a changing world. New developments,

shifting power relations and new antagonisms have produced different responses, different approaches toward the imperialist project. With the success of the Bolshevik revolution in the immediate wake of an unprecedented bloodletting for nakedly imperial goals, the task of suffocating real existing socialism rose as the primary focus of imperialist powers. Those same powers recognised that the Soviets were encouraging and aiding the fight not only against the spread of colonies, but against their very existence.

Consequently, it is understandable that the next round of imperialist war was instigated by rabidly anti-communist, extreme nationalist regimes in Germany, Italy, Spain and Japan. World War II came as a caustic mix of expansionism, xenophobia, and anti-communism.

In the twentieth century, accelerated by the technologies of war honed in World War I, oil production played a greater and greater role in shaping the future fields of

imperial contest. Acquiring oil and other resources was not an insignificant factor in the aggressions of both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Clearly, both economic factors and political factors shaped the trajectory of imperialism in the first half of the twentieth century.

While no one doubts that the old European great powers hewed to an imperialist course until World War II (after all, they ferociously clung to their colonies), the myth still exists that the US was a reluctant imperialist. Apologists point to the 'meagre' colonial empire wrenched from Spain (conveniently ignoring the nineteenth-century expansion from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans as well as the deals, wars, and genocide that 'earned' that expansion). They point to the 'isolationist' foreign policy of the US following the Treaty of Versailles, a claim demolished by the historian William Appleman Williams and his intellectual offspring.¹ Appleman Williams showed that imperialist ends are achievable by many means,

both crude and belligerent and subtle and persuasive. He showed that domination is effectively achieved through economic ties that bind countries through economic coercion, a tactic as effective as colonial rule. US policy, in this period, anticipates the financial imperialism of the twenty-first century. Appleman Williams and others revealed a continuous US imperialist foreign policy as doggedly determined as its European and Asian rivals.

A New Model Prevails

After World War II, the balance of power shifted in favour of a Euro-Asian socialist bloc centred around the Soviet Union and a liberated China, threatening even greater resistance to imperial world dominance. Through both mass resistance and armed struggle, colonial chains were loosened or broken. The war-weakened European powers strained to hang on to their colonial possessions. Moreover, the US, the supreme capitalist power, largely rejected the old colonial model.



In its stead, less coercive, but even more binding economic ties were secured through 'aid', loans, investments, and post-war institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This 'neocolonial' tactic especially recommended itself because of the needs of the Cold War and the vast economic asymmetries favouring US power. Since the Cold War was also a monumental battle of ideas,

US rulers sought to cast aside the ugly, oppressive imagery of colonial administration and military occupation. Further, the enormous need for capital by those under-developed by colonialism or ravaged by war could easily be fulfilled by the US, but at the price of rigid economic ties binding a country to the global capitalist economy now dominated by US capital.

The towering figure of Africa's most fervent advocate

for unity, socialism, and defiance of imperialism, Kwame Nkrumah, was a pioneer in developing our understanding of neocolonialism. He wrote in 1965 in words that ring true today:

"Faced with the militant peoples of the ex-colonial territories in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America, imperialism

simply switches tactics. Without a qualm it dispenses with its flags, and even with certain of its more hated expatriate officials. This means, so it claims, that it is 'giving' independence to its former subjects, to be followed by 'aid' for their development. Under cover of such phrases, however, it devises innumerable



ways to accomplish objectives formerly achieved by naked colonialism. It is this sum total of these modern attempts to perpetuate colonialism, while at the same time talking about ‘freedom’, which has come to be known as *neocolonialism*.²

President Truman affirmed the US commitment to the evolved neocolonial programme in his 1949 inaugural address when he rejected the “old imperialism”³. Gordon Gray, in a special report to the President issued on November 10, 1950, offered a motivation for the new programme:

“The largest part of the non-Soviet world ... measured in terms of population and land areas, consists of economically underdeveloped regions. With some exceptions, the countries of the three areas – Latin America, Asia, and Africa – fall into this category. In the non-communist parts of these areas live ... 70 percent of the population of the entire non-Soviet world. These areas also contain a large part of the world’s natural resources [T]hey represent an economic potential of great importance The contrast between their aspirations and their present state of unrelieved poverty makes them susceptible to domestic unrest and provides fertile ground for the growth of communist movements”⁴

But the US variant of classical imperialism predates the Cold War instantiation embraced by the Truman

administration. As Appleman Williams notes, post-World War I leaders like Hoover, Coolidge, Hughes, and Stimson endorsed an international ‘community of interest’, achieved by encouraging the penetration of US business worldwide. In Appleman Williams’s words,

“These men were not imperialist in the traditional sense They sought instead the ‘internationalisation of business’ Through the use of economic power they wanted to establish a common bond Their deployment of America’s material strength is unquestioned.”⁵

It is important to note that their choice of a more benign imperialism was not based upon moral considerations, but self-interest. Moreover, it necessarily preferred stability when possible, even if stability came through the exercise of military might. President Coolidge acknowledged this in a Memorial Day address in 1928:

“Our investments and trade relations are such that it is almost impossible to conceive of any conflict anywhere on Earth which would not affect us injuriously.”⁶

As a late-comer to the imperial scramble, US elites chose the non-colonial option, avoiding the enormous costs in coercion, counter-insurgency, and paternalistic occupation associated with colonialism – and equally avoiding conflicts that might rock existing and expanding business relations.

In the post-World War II era, the Marshall Plan and the Point Four Programme were early examples of neocolonial Trojan Horses, programmes

aimed at cementing exploitative capitalist relations while posturing as generosity and assistance. They, and other programmes, were successful efforts to weave consent, seduction, and extortion into a robust foreign policy securing the goals of imperialism without the moral revulsion of colonial repression and the cost of vast colonies.

In the wake of World War II, US imperialism reaped generous harvests from the ‘new’ imperialism. Commerce Department figures show total earnings on US investments abroad nearly doubling from 1946 through to 1950. As of 1950, 69% of US direct investments abroad were in extractive industries, much of that in oil production (direct investment income from petroleum grew by 350% in the five-year period).⁷ Clearly the US had recognised its enormous thirst for oil both to fuel economic growth and to power the military machine necessary to protect and enforce the “internationalisation of business”.

One estimate of the rate of return on US direct investments from 1946 up to and including 1950 claims that Middle Eastern investments (mainly oil) garnered twice the rate of return of investments in Marshall Plan participant countries, which in turn produced a rate of return nearly twice that of investments made in countries that did not participate in the US plan.⁷ Undoubtedly, US elites were pleased with the rewards of the new imperial gambit.

Patterns were set in the period immediately after World War II, patterns that persist even today. The basis for US hostility toward Venezuela can be anticipated in US imperialism’s early stranglehold on the Venezuelan economy. As early as 1947, the US exported nearly \$178 million of

machinery and vehicles to that country, primarily to and for foreign-owned oil companies. Only \$21 million of that total went to domestically owned companies or for local agricultural use. In the same year, the income from American direct investments totaled \$153 million.⁸ Is it any wonder that the US would meet any independent path of development, such as the Bolivarian Revolution, with intense resistance?

The idea of parlaying economic power, capital resources, loans, and ‘aid’ into neocolonial dependency through the mechanisms of free and unfettered trade – the “internationalisation of business” – may well be seen as the precursor of the various trade organisations and trade agreements of today, like GATT, NAFTA, TPP, and so many other instruments for greasing the rails for US corporations.

Outside the socialist bloc, much of the world was newly liberated from colonial domination, but ripe for imperialist penetration in the post-war era. For two decades after WWII, the socialist bloc was united in solidarity with the forces in opposition to imperialism. Arrayed against the anti-imperialist alliance were the imperialist powers, bound together by the NATO alliance, and their client states. In the imperialist camp, the anti-communist Cold War imperatives secured US leadership and constrained inter-imperialist rivalries in this period.

Two Worlds, or Three?

It is both useful and accurate to characterise that era as a confrontation between imperialism and its opponents: imperialism and anti-imperialism.

But in the battle of ideas, Western intellectuals preferred to divide the world in a different fashion. They preferred to speak and write about three worlds: a First World of developed,

'advanced' capitalist countries, a Second World of communism, and a Third World of underdeveloped or developing countries. Clearly, the gambit here was to isolate the world of communism from the dynamics of global capitalism and plant the notion that, with the help of some stern advice and perhaps a loan, the Third World could enjoy the bounty of the First World. The three-world concept captured completely the world-view espoused by Gordon Gray in his missive to President Truman quoted above. Assuredly, the three-world distinction was both useful and productive for elites in the West – decidedly more useful than the division between imperialists and anti-imperialists.

Sadly, late-Maoism, breaking away from the socialist bloc, uncritically adopted the three-world concept in its polemics against the Soviet Union. Embracing a tortured, twisted reinterpretation, Maoism sought to separate the socialist world from the anti-imperialist struggle and establish the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a beacon for the Third World. In reality, this theoretical contortion resulted in the PRC consistently siding with imperialism for the next three decades on nearly every front, including and especially in Angola and Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, significant sectors of the Western left fell prey to the confusions engendered by the debates of that time. To this day, many liberals and left activists cannot locate opposition to US dominance as objectively anti-imperialist. They place their own personal distaste for regimes like those of Milošević, Assad or Gaddafi ahead of a people's objective resistance to the dictations of imperialism. Confusion over the central role of the imperialism/anti-imperialism dynamic breeds cynicism and misplaced allegiances.

For example, Islamic fundamentalist fighters sided with imperialism against the socialist-oriented government of Afghanistan and Soviet internationalists. When the same forces turned on their imperialist masters their *actions*, not their ideology, became objectively speaking anti-imperialist. For other reasons – irrationalism, fanaticism, intolerance – we may condemn or disown them, while locating them, at the same time, in the framework of anti-imperialism. Similarly, in the imperialist dismantling of Yugoslavia, it doesn't matter whether imperialism's collaborators were Croatian Ustashi-fascists, or Bosnian liberals, they were all aligned with imperialism and its goals. Those who opposed these goals were *acting* objectively in the service of anti-imperialism. Moral rigidity is no excuse for ignoring the course of historical processes. Nor are murky notions of human rights.

As it has for well over a century, viewing international relations through the lens of imperialism/anti-imperialism serves as the best guide to clarity and understanding; imperialists prey as well upon those whom we may find otherwise objectionable.

Confront or Undermine?

It would be wrong to leave the impression that US imperialism is solely based upon dollar persuasion or economic coercion. American military might exists as the international police force for imperial maintenance and expansion. The difference is that the US variant of imperialism chooses the option of planting military installations throughout the world – like the cavalry outposts of Western lore – rather than incurring the costs of infrastructure and administration associated with Old World colonialism.

In addition, US

imperialism confers special status on trusted watchdogs strategically placed in various regions. Before the revolution, the Shah's Iran functioned as a regional cop, armed with the latest US weaponry. South Korea filled a similar role in the Far East, replacing Taiwan after US rapprochement with the PRC. With sensitivity to oil politics, the US has paired reliable Arab countries – Saudi Arabia or Egypt – with Israel to look after things in the Near East.

But employing regional gendarmes has challenged US policies, as domestic upheavals or peer embarrassment have convinced some trusted clients that subservience will be widely viewed as – well – slavish subservience. Consequently, cooperation with the US has become more covert, less servile.

The hottest moments of the Cold War demonstrated that military confrontation with communist-led forces was not a wise move either in desired results or costs. The Korean and Indochinese Wars, interventions visiting a military reign of terror on small countries, proved that even the greatest imperialist military machine could not match the tenacity and dedication to victory of a far less materially advantaged foe. After the decisive victory of the Vietnamese liberators, the US never again sought a direct military confrontation with communism.

But when the struggle of those fighting to escape imperialism and the capitalist orbit escalated, the US began relying more on surrogates, mercenaries, and clients. In place of direct military intervention, US policymakers relied on covert schemes, secret armies, and economic sabotage. In the Portuguese African colonies and South Africa, in Ethiopia, South Yemen, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and several other countries, Marxism-Leninism served as a guiding ideology for liberation and nation-

building. At the same time, Marxist parties played a significant role in the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), in the Portuguese revolution, and in European politics. By the end of the 1970s, the zenith of militant anti-imperialism and the global influence of Marxism-Leninism were reached. Imperialism appeared to be in retreat worldwide. And the leading imperialist country, the US, had suffered a domestic crisis of legitimacy from the extra-legalities of the Nixon Administration and serious economic instability.

Unfortunately, supporting this shift in the balance of forces globally came at great costs to the Soviet economy. The newly born, socialist-oriented countries were largely resource-poor, economically ravaged, and riven with ethnic and social schisms, all of which were easily and readily exploited by imperialism. Aid and assistance taxed the Soviet economy and in no small way contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union a decade later. Civil war, dysfunctional economies (thanks to colonialism), insufficient cadres, and unskilled administrators left those committed to building socialism facing a profound challenge, a challenge that proved impossible for most after the demise of the Soviet Union. It would have taken decades to integrate these countries into the socialist economic community. Unfortunately, they were not granted that opportunity.

Faced with a deteriorating international position, the cornerstone of the imperialist alliance – the US and the UK – changed course, electing regimes that refused to accept a restructured world order disadvantaging imperialism. The Thatcher and Reagan administrations signalled a new belligerence, a vigorous and aggressive assault on the twentieth-century bastion of anti-imperialism, the socialist community. A massive arms



build-up and innumerable covert interventions coincided with the rise of an ideologically soft-headed Soviet leadership to dismantle the European socialist community in the decade to follow.

With the demise of the European socialist bloc, imperialism regained its nineteenth-century swagger, enjoying a nearly unopposed freedom of action. TINA – the doctrine that There Is No Alternative – seemed to prevail as much for imperial domination, as for capitalism.

A shaken international left faced a new, unfavourable balance of forces going into a new century. Far too many stumbled, took to navel-gazing, or spun fanciful, speculative explanations of the new era. The moment was reminiscent of the period after the failed revolution of 1905 famously described by Lenin:

“Depression, demoralisation, splits, discord, defection, and pornography took the place of politics. There was an ever greater drift towards philosophical idealism; mysticism became the garb of counter-revolutionary sentiments. At the same time, however, it was this great defeat that taught the revolutionary parties and the revolutionary class a real and very useful lesson, a lesson in historical dialectics, a lesson in an understanding of the political struggle, and in the art and science of waging that struggle. It is at moments of need that one learns who one’s friends are. Defeated armies learn their lesson.”⁹

Unfortunately, most of the left learned nothing from the defeat of 1991.

Militant Anti-Imperialism Returns

If Marx teaches us nothing else, he reminds us that historical processes play out in unexpected, perhaps even unwelcome, ways. The suppression of secularism as a tactic for disarming movements for independence or social progress is as old as the British Empire and probably older. Certainly the British colonial authorities were masters at divide and conquer, encouraging ethnic or religious differences to smother otherwise secular movements. It was this proven approach that joined US and Israeli policy planners in making every effort to discredit, thwart, split, and penetrate every secular movement in the Middle East: influential and substantial communist parties, left Ba’athists, radical democrats, nationalists, etc. The secular PLO was notably targeted. At the same time, they sought to use Islamic fundamentalists by covertly supporting them as an alternative, and actively encouraging divisive conflict. Hamas was one such organisation, chosen specifically as a hostile option to the militantly anti-imperialist PLO.

Similarly, the US and its allies sought to weaken the Soviet effort in Afghanistan by funding and arming the Islamic fundamentalists engaged in a civil war against forces advocating free secular education, land reform, gender equality and modernisation.

Radical Islamic fundamentalism had waned in the 1950s and 1960s, losing momentum to the awakening inspired by Nasserism and other nascent national movements. But the encouragement and material support of the US and Israel rekindled these movements. Add the demise of the Soviet Union and the loss of support for secular national movements, and imperialism blazed a path for the growth and prominence of fundamentalism.

Not surprisingly, the grievances, the injustices endured by the people of the Middle East now found expression through the organs and institutions of fundamentalism, just as the peoples of Latin America found expression for their plight through the Catholic Church when denied other options by fascistic military dictatorships.

The Palestinian Hamas-inspired *intifada* shocked Israel and its allies from their smug arrogance. And the brutal attacks on US interests, the US military, and on targets in the domestic US further shocked imperialism. Lost in the revenge hysteria, hyper-patriotism, and religious bigotry fueled by the attacks was the *casus belli* invoked by the fundamentalists: the occupation of Palestine since the 1967 war and the use of Saudi bases as US military staging points before and after the 1991 invasion of Iraq.

While the targeting of civilians is regrettable, it is regrettable in its *entirety*: whether they be German civilians bombed by the allies in Dresden, Korean women and children massacred by US soldiers in Taejon, or villages destroyed by US aircraft in Vietnam. But it is more than a curiosity or a mark of barbarism that oppressed peoples facing a modern, advanced army with superior resources fight by different rules. Nor has there ever been an anti-imperialist movement that was *not* called ‘terrorist’ by its adversaries. Granting that Marx and Engels were not always consistent or correct on these questions, Engels offers insight in his column in the *New York Daily Tribune* published on June 5, 1857:

“The piratical policy of the British Government has caused the universal outbreak of all Chinese against all foreigners, and marked it as a war of extermination.

What is an army to do against a people resorting to such means of warfare? ... Civilisation-mongers who throw hot shells on a defenceless city, and add rape to murder, may call the system cowardly, barbarous, atrocious; but what matters to the Chinese if it be only successful? Since the British treat them as barbarians, they cannot deny to them the full benefit of their barbarism. If their kidnappings, surprises, midnight massacres are what we call cowardly, the civilisation-mongers should not forget that according to their own showing they could not stand against European means of destruction with their ordinary means of warfare.

In short, instead of moralising on the horrible atrocities of the Chinese, as the chivalrous English press does, we had better recognise that this is a war *pro aris et focis*, a popular war for the maintenance of Chinese nationality, with all its overbearing prejudice, stupidity, learned ignorance and pedantic barbarism if you like, but yet a popular war. And in a popular war the means used by the insurgent nation cannot be measured by the commonly recognised rules of regular warfare, nor by any other abstract standard, but by the degree of civilisation only attained by that insurgent nation.”¹⁰

Writing well over a century and a half ago, Engels better understood the dynamics of anti-imperialist resistance than

modern-day commentators, including most of the left.

Failing to understand the dynamic of ‘popular war’, as Engels called it, only led to escalation: an invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, a subsequent invasion and occupation of Iraq, incursions in Somalia, drone attacks throughout the region, aggression against Libya, destabilising Syria, isolating Iran and other actions proclaimed as ‘anti-terrorist’, but perceived by the people of the Middle East as aimed at forcing their submission to outside *diktats*. Accordingly, there is little chance that the hostilities invited and unleashed by imperialism will ebb any time soon. Only an exit and a cessation of meddling can promise that result.

Writing in 1989, well before the full unfolding of militant Islamic fundamentalism, Manfred Bienefeld reflected upon what he saw as the dimming prospects for anti-imperialist struggle, speculating on the ...

“... terrible possibility that in today’s world these forces may be permanently beaten back, aided by the massive resources and powers available to the ‘international system’ and their local collaborators. *It is striking that those movements that appear to be capable of sustaining such resistance for any length of time are movements like those of Islamic fundamentalism which refuse to calculate costs and benefits according to the calculus of those who shape the international system.*”¹¹ [my emphasis –ZZ]

Bienefeld’s words were eerily prescient. Like the Chinese response to British aggression, the resistance to US imperialism

Hugo Chávez was the lightning rod for anti-imperialism in Latin America



in the Middle East has been nasty; fighters have refused to submit to incineration and slaughter like the Iraqi army when faced with an overwhelmingly overpowering conventional army in 1991 and 2003. And like the English press cited by Engels, the Western media moralises over tactics while purposefully ignoring the century of great-power aggression, occupation, and colonisation of the region. For the apologists of imperialism, the systematic injustices of the past carry no moral weight against the most desperate actions of the powerless. One is reminded of the scene in Pontecorvo’s brilliant film, *The Battle of Algiers*, when the captured Ben M’Hidi is asked by a reporter why the liberation movement, FLN, plants bombs in discos and schools. His reply is succinct: “Let us have your bombers and you can have our women’s baskets.”

Where Islamic fundamentalism will take the people of the Middle

East (and other areas of largely Islamic populations) is unclear. Close study of the different threads would undoubtedly show different and socially and economically diverse prospects. But what is clear is that, as long as it carries the mantle of the only force resisting imperialism in the region, it will enjoy support and probably grow, though fraught with the contradictions that come from religious zealotry.

Risings in the South

Resistance to imperialism in the backyard of the US – Central and South America – has a long and noble history: long, because it traces back to the fight of the indigenous people against conquest and enslavement; noble, because millions have given life and limb in wars of liberation and movements of resistance.

But it wasn’t until 1959 that a Latin American country broke completely away from the grasp of imperialism. The Cuban revolution produced

a government hostile to foreign intervention, rapacious landowners, and greedy corporations – a formula sure to bring the disapproval of the powerful neighbour to the north. The rebel leaders met threats with defiance. As US belligerence began to suffocate the revolution, the Cuban leaders turned to and received support from the socialist community. In retaliation for this audacious move, the US organised an invasion of the island, only to be met with overwhelming, unexpected resistance. Unable to bring Cuba to its knees, imperialism enacted a cruel quarantine of Cuban socialism that persists to this day.

In the post-war era, the cause of the Popular Unity programme in Chile inspired a generation in much the way that the cause of the Spanish Republic inspired a generation in the 1930s. The Allende government embodied the aspirations of nearly the entire left: a break from US imperial domination and a peaceful,



electoral road to socialism. In 1973 those aspirations were dashed by economic subversion, the CIA, and a brutal coup launched by the Chilean military. More importantly, the coup in Chile sent the message that US imperialism would readily accept military, even fascist rule in Latin America before it would tolerate others following the Cuban path, the path away from imperialist domination.

But the tide of anti-imperialism could not be held back. Leaders like Lula, Rouseff, and Bachelet emerged from resistance to military dictators or, like Morales, from trade union militancy. As democratic changes inevitably surfaced, all were positioned and prepared to take their respective countries in another direction. The Kirchners in Argentina were more a product of the *Peronista* tradition of populist nationalism, a tradition often annoying the superpower to the north.

But most interesting and, in many ways, most promising, was the emergence of Hugo Chávez as the lightning rod for anti-imperialism in Latin America. Because Chávez rose from the military, he seemed to hold a key to unlocking the problem of military meddling in Latin American politics. Moreover, the Venezuelan military was a Latin American rarity – a military unwelcoming to US training and penetration. Chávez's prestige with the military held or neutralised much of it from going over to the 2002 coup attempt.

Clearly the most radical of the wave of new Latin American leaders, Chávez advocated for socialism. While Venezuelan 'socialism' remains a visionary, moralistic project, neither fully developed nor firmly grounded, it counts as an energetic pole raising questions of economic justice in the most profound fashion. Growing from a strong

personal relationship between Hugo and his spiritual kin, Fidel, Cuba and Venezuela mark one pole of militant anti-imperialism. Together, they stand for political and economic independence from the discipline of great powers, their institutions, and transnational corporations.

Because they cherish their independence, they have earned the enmity of US imperialism. Lest anyone believe the recent trade for the Cuban patriots negotiated by the Cuban government means that the US government seeks peaceful coexistence with anti-imperialism, think again. The US has, in fact, escalated its aggression against Venezuela and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on the heels of that exchange.

The other social and political movements formed in Latin America range across the political spectrum from cautiously social-democratic to avowedly socialist. They stretch from Nicaragua in Central America through the entire Southern continent. Though they have no common political ideology, they have a shared aversion to accepting the demands of greater powers, a refusal to toe the imperialist line. To a lesser or greater extent, they support independence from the economic institutions governing the global economy. And they tend to support the consolidation and mutual support of their vital interests within the Latin American community. To that extent, they constitute a progressive, anti-imperialist bloc.

Today's Imperialism and its Problems

Any survey of imperialism and its adversaries must note the pathetic role of most of the US and European left in recent years. Even in the most repressive moments of the Cold War, large anti-war movements challenged militarism, aggression, and war. But those movements have shrivelled before

indifference and ideological confusion. In the post-Soviet era, imperialism cynically appropriated the language of human rights and manipulated or bred an entire generation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with innocuous, seemingly socially conscious banners, but disruptive missions. So-called 'colour' revolutions proliferated, paradoxically supported and directed by a host of government- and private capital-funded NGOs. These organisations promoted a brand of 'democracy' that mobilised Western-oriented liberals and Western culture-mesmerised youth against established, often election-legitimised governments. Most of the Western left naively applauded and uncritically supported these actions with no understanding of the forces at play.

Much of the European and US left passively watched the dismantling of Yugoslavia, blinded by NATO proclamations about self-determination and ethnic violence, as if kindling the fires of extreme nationalism would produce anything other than separatism and hatred. In a masterful assault on credibility, NATO bombs were interpreted as enforcing human rights in Serbia and Kosovo.

The imperialist game of deception proved to work so well that it has been repeated again and again, in Iraq, Libya, Ukraine, and Syria, to name only a few. It's a sad commentary on the US labour movement (and its European counterparts) that it stands aloof from US imperialism (when not assisting it). Samuel Gompers, the conservative first president of the American Federation of Labor, joined the Anti-Imperialist League over a century ago; his counterparts of today cannot utter the words.

Looking back, it is likely that few if any of the US and

NATO aggressions of the last twenty-five years would have been dared if the Soviet Union still existed. Put another way, nearly all of the many interventions and wars against minor military powers were initiated because the US recognised that there was no powerful deterrent like the former Soviet Union. In that sense, imperialism has had a free hand.

Nonetheless, while twenty-first century imperialism endures, it does so despite great challenges and severe strains. Unending wars and deep and lasting economic crises have winded the US and its NATO allies. Military resistance to imperialism has proven resilient and determined, as would be expected of those fighting in defence of their own territory. The US all-volunteer military and low casualty rate have been a calculated success in pacifying many in the US, yet there is a widespread disillusionment with war's duration and lack of resolution. Despite media courtiers continually stirring the pot of fear and hatred with hysterical calls for a war on 'terror', the cost of that war in material and human terms becomes more and more apparent.

Memories of Vietnam haunt military strategists in the US who are finding it difficult to disengage in the face of escalating violence and the surfacing of new adversaries. It may be tempting to follow the lead of many liberals and label the trail of broken nations, shattered cities, slaughtered and maimed people travelled by the US military, its mercenaries, and camp followers as a product of incompetence and miscalculations. It is not. Instead, it is the product of imperialism's failure to maintain peacefully a global economic system that guarantees the exploitative and unequal relations that enable imperialist dominance. In

fact, it is a sign of a weakening imperialism that less than thirty years ago triumphantly stood admiring its final victory.¹²

The old symptoms return to afflict imperialism. Lenin saw the intensification of imperialist rivalries – competition for resources, spheres of influence, capital penetration – as an intrinsic feature of imperialism. In his time, the British Empire dominated, but with Euro-Asian rivals rising to challenge its supremacy. Commentators noted the ‘scramble’ for colonies and the rising tensions that ensued. Military and economic blocs were formed to strengthen the hands of the various contestants. World War followed.

While inter-imperialist war may not be imminent, the signs of discord, intensified competition, and shifting alliances are growing. Tensions between the US, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Russia, and even the EU are constant. Japanese nationalism has stirred historic antagonisms in the Pacific region, challenging the PRC’s economic might. The US has sought not to diffuse these tensions, but to intervene to advance its own interests.

The US has promoted or prodded Eastern European nationalism to shear away countries that were formerly accepted as part of the Russian sphere of influence. Not surprisingly, Russia has interpreted these moves as hostile acts and taken countermeasures. The Ukrainian crisis has produced belligerence unseen since the Cold War. At the same time, the EU opposes escalating anti-Russian punitive sanctions urged by the US, sensing the danger of disrupted economic relations and even war at a time when the European community is already suffering severe economic pain.

New alliances have formed as a counter-force to

US imperialism. The BRIC group, for example, exists as a loose community made up of significant players in the global capitalist economy: the PRC, India, Russia, and Brazil.¹³ Though the members are not ostensibly in conflict with the US, they oppose the hegemony of the US in international institutions and the tyranny of the US dollar in international markets. They espouse a multi-polar world without US domination. Theirs is not an anti-imperialist bloc, but an anti-US hegemony bloc. They are not opposed to the predation inherent in international economic competition; they are only opposed to US *dominance* of that predation.

This is in contrast to the ALBA bloc, a group of eleven Caribbean, Central and Southern American nations establishing an economic community. ALBA was envisioned by then Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez as an alliance moving to escape the clutches of the global economic system. Chávez saw the expanding development of mutual trade, shared institutions, integration and a common currency as steps toward a community more and more removed from the rapacious international capitalist system. Of course that is a promise only to be realised far into the future. Moreover, it is a project only capable of achieving escape velocity when the member states embrace socialist economic principles. Nonetheless, ALBA counts as a significant irritant to imperialism.

Political forces are unleashed worldwide that promise to disrupt the course of imperialism. Unanswered economic discontent has fuelled nationalism and religious zealotry, forces that inspire distrust of existing institutions and open markets. Spain, for example, is riven with separatism; even the UK is threatened with Scottish

autonomy. Economic nihilism and conspiratorial xenophobia have strengthened neo-fascist movements throughout Europe to the point where they seriously threaten the existing order.

Clearly, the political, social, and economic fabric of imperialism, its stability, and its ability to govern the world is under great stress. From world economic crisis to interminable wars, the world system has fallen far from its moment of celebration at the end of the Cold War.

Indeed, imperialism has changed. Colonialism – with the exception of Puerto Rico, Guam and a few other remnants of the past – is gone, with vestiges, like Hong Kong, either absorbed or liberated. Yet what otherwise exists today strongly resembles the imperialism of Lenin’s time, the imperialism of economically vulturous nations unfettered by a counterforce like the Soviet Union. Perhaps, the ‘new’ imperialism is little more than a return to the imperialism that opened the last century with the US replacing Great Britain as the dominant imperial power – the ‘new’ is simply the reassertion of the old.

Understanding today’s imperialism requires some ideological retooling. The

days of an alliance of socialist countries and newly liberated colonies searching for new roads under the socialist umbrella are past. In its stead are capitalist countries competing against the more dominating capitalist countries. Should they succeed in deposing the US, they in turn will fight to retain hegemony. That is, they will behave like a capitalist country. Of course opposing US hegemony is objectively anti-imperialist even when it seeks to impose its will on another capitalist country (Russia, today, for example). Indeed that is *part* of the struggle against imperialism – an essential part. Likewise, the struggle to resist and end US aggression and occupation of lands in the Middle East is a *component* of the contest with imperialism.

But the fight to end imperialism once and for all is the fight to end capitalism.

■ *First published 17 February 2015 on the Philosophers for Change web site at <http://philosophersforchange.org/2015/02/17/the-new-imperialism/>, and edited marginally here for points of clarification and such matters as British spelling and punctuation.*

Notes and References

1 For an early exposition of this thesis, see W A Williams, *The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920s*, in *Science and Society*, Vol 18, No 1, Winter 1954, pp 1-20; online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40400232>.

2 K Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Nelson, London, 1965, Ch 1; online at <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/nkrumah/neo-colonialism/ch01.htm>.

3 Quoted by H Olden and P Phillips, *The Point Four Program: Promise or Menace?* in *Science and Society*, Vol 16, No 3, Summer 1952, p 222; online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40400136>.

4 Olden and Phillips, *op cit*, p 224.

5 Williams, *op cit*, pp 13-16.

6 *Ibid*, p 16.

7 All data from Olden and Phillips, *op cit*, pp 234-7.

8 *Ibid*, p 232.

9 V I Lenin, ‘Left-Wing’ Communism, an Infantile Disorder, International Publishers, 1969, p 13; also in *Collected Works*, Vol 31, pp 27-8.

10 F Engels, *Persia and China*, in K Marx and F Engels, *On Colonialism*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, no date, pp 127, 128; also in Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 15, pp 281-2.

11 M Bienefeld, *Lessons of History and the Developing World*, in *Monthly Review*, July-August, 1989, p 37.

12 Most famously, in Francis Fukuyama’s triumphalist *The End of History and the Last Man*, Penguin, 1992.

13 As a group, the BRIC countries have held annual summits since 2009 and now include South Africa as BRICS –Ed.

Latin America, Revolutionary Developments and Challenges

By Albano Nunes
Portuguese Communist Party (PCP)

FOR COMMUNISTS, revolutionaries and anti-imperialists, Latin America¹ is at present synonymous with hope. And there are strong reasons for that to be the case.

Unlike other parts of the world, where imperialism is on the offensive – despite the hard but unknown struggles that are taking place and that will eventually surprise us, just as the 1974 April Revolution in Portugal astonished the world – in Latin America there has been a recent trend that is democratic, progressive and anti-imperialist.

While it is true that we are witnessing processes that claim to be ‘socialist’, we are not yet seeing socialist revolutions, *ie* revolutions where the working class and its vanguard party play the leading role and where in-depth political, economic and social transformations take away economic and political power from big capital and transfer it to the working class and its allies, in particular to peasants who are socially very significant in the whole region. Only Cuba undertook such an in-depth revolution, and power was transferred to workers. There, a socialist society is being built under the leadership of the Communist Party of Cuba.

Thanks to the heroic resistance of the Cuban people against the onslaught of imperialism to undermine and destroy its achievements, the Cuban revolution has become an example and a powerful stimulus for the liberation struggles

of the peoples of Latin America, the Caribbean and the world.

Be that as it may, the revolutionary processes taking place in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia or even Nicaragua and Ecuador, of differing depth and with different features but identical in their democratic, popular, progressive and anti-imperialist nature, are of great importance. They show that, by mobilising the popular masses, it is possible to gain ground on big capital and imperialism, to mobilise national resources for social progress and to take steps towards the eradication of poverty and the most blatant social injustice and inequalities and to address fundamental aspirations such as work with rights and access to healthcare, social security, education and culture.

Even in countries where the economic power of big capital and the capitalist relations of production have remained essentially untouched, the processes taking place, while contradictory, have a strong democratic nature and have resulted in a reassertion of sovereignty and social progress – for instance in Brazil, after Lula’s first electoral victory in 2002. These processes are converging with revolutionary processes and, as such, should be valued, if nothing else at least for their positive contribution to the complex process of rearrangement of forces on the world stage.

Indeed, the importance of the



Students studying at the Latin American School of Medicine in Havana, Cuba march in the Plaza de la Revolución on May Day

developments and positive trends currently apparent in Latin America and the Caribbean is reflected in the visible decline of the influence of the US in Latin America, formerly and arrogantly perceived as a mere ‘backyard’. This decline is particularly worrying for the most reactionary and aggressive sectors in the US. Worth mentioning among their recent setbacks are the failed attempt to isolate and defeat Cuba, the FTAA fiasco² and the failure of a series of putschist operations by the US to destabilise and overthrow legitimate governments such as those of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador,³ where the popular masses played a decisive role.

It would be a mistake not to value the winds of change that are blowing in Latin America and their significant international implications. Only ignorance or dogmatic and sectarian criteria can justify such a mistake. But it would also be a mistake not to see the limitations and contradictions of the processes under way, which require not only consolidation but intensification,



with structural-type measures that will radically alter the correlation of forces which is still favourable to big capital and imperialism, in the economy and the media in particular.

The setbacks have been severe, but one cannot say that the reactionary oligarchies and imperialism, and first and foremost US imperialism, have been defeated and their subversive ability quashed – as shown by the coups in Honduras and Paraguay.⁴ Nor has the threat of direct military intervention using their dense network of military bases in the region disappeared.⁵ As a matter of fact, the US has made no secret of its willingness to revive the infamous Monroe doctrine⁶ and it is actively working with its local agents to reverse the current situation and recover lost ground. We should remain vigilant. The warning included in the La Paz Declaration of the 20th Meeting of the São Paulo Forum⁷ with regard to US subversive actions is very telling.

US imperialism replaced Spanish and Portuguese colonialism at the beginning

of the 19th century and upstaged British imperialism and that of other European powers. It does not look kindly upon the imperialist ambitions of the European Union in Latin America and the Caribbean, and remains the Number 1 enemy of Latin American peoples. It is mainly against US imperialism that alliances have to be wrought and the struggle for national sovereignty, social progress and socialism has to be fought.

Class struggles in every country, and in particular those that pit the working class and peasantry against big capital and the large landowners, are not in contradiction with anti-imperialist struggles in support of national sovereignty and independence, but rather can be combined dialectically with them, since the alliance between the local dominant classes and big transnational capital is very close indeed. Defending sovereignty is a fundamental component of the cooperation and integration processes that are taking place in the region: from ALBA⁸ to Mercosur, from CELAC and UNASUR to Petrocaribe

and BancoSur,⁹ those processes have different natures and scopes but they all coincide in their anti-imperialist outlook.

That is why, in expressing internationalist solidarity with the workers and peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, we should not overlook, in the maze of contradictions and new features that characterise the social and political realities of their countries, that their antagonism *vis-à-vis* US imperialism is particularly intense and that the fight against attempts by the US to recover its lost hegemony should be at the forefront of the revolutionary struggle. Those attempts are aimed at reversing and defeating revolutionary processes under way and at weakening the anti-Yankee alliance. This is an alliance that is not free from contradictions (as reflected in Brazil's aspirations to become a regional power) but which has been gradually emerging under the Bolivarian banner of 'Our America'. Cuba and Venezuela play a decisive role in that alliance, which also involves a convergence with large capitalist countries like Brazil and Argentina.

It is against this backdrop that the defeat in Brazil of the vast coalition of reactionary forces with imperialism is of particular significance. The coalition was designed to thwart Dilma Rousseff's candidacy for the Presidency and to put an end to and reverse the process launched after the first electoral victory of the Workers' Party, PT, and its allies (including the CP of Brazil). Dilma's re-election by itself in no way guarantees the continuation and strengthening of the process, which requires in-depth structural reforms that can only be brought about with the mobilisation of the working class and the masses to overcome the resistance of the powerful national bourgeoisie and to alter the correlation of forces that remains unfavourable to revolutionary and left-wing forces within institutions.¹⁰ However, it is true that a victory of the right-wing candidate would have paved the way for an offensive that would have reversed not only the political developments in Brazil but also the liberating trends emerging in Latin America.

It is therefore strange to note that, notwithstanding the inevitable differences of opinion regarding developments in Brazil, some have not understood the aforementioned threat and have publicly criticised and cursed those who understood it and took a stand accordingly.



Historical Background

To understand the current situation in Latin America and to evaluate the progressive and anti-imperialist developments there, it is essential to take in the region's history and the protracted struggle against colonialism and imperialism, the slavery and genocide endured by the indigenous peoples, and the appalling exploitation of mineworkers or landless peasants in large estates. There is no better book than Eduardo Galeano's magnificent work *The Open Veins of Latin America*¹¹ for explaining the origins of the cry for freedom that reverberates across the continent, and which in Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and other countries is reflected in state policies that will eventually be victorious, pulling millions of people out of the poverty and underdevelopment that have afflicted Latin American peoples, despite the enormous natural riches of their respective countries.

What we are witnessing today is very much a second cycle of national liberation – since the achievement of formal independence at the beginning of the 19th century was immediately followed by imperialist domination, supported by local oligarchies, that imposed extreme forms of exploitation and oppression everywhere. There is not a single country in Latin America that, for longer or shorter periods, has not experienced a cruel dictatorship: from Batista in Cuba, Somoza in Nicaragua or Stroessner in Paraguay to the military dictatorships that arrested, tortured and assassinated thousands in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay in the context of 'Operation Condor'. The fascist dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile will remain one of the most harrowing symbols of the extent to which capital will go when its power is threatened, as happened back in the 1970s with the powerful popular movement in Chile and the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende.

The resistance struggles and popular movements emerging all over Latin America cannot be discussed in detail here. But it would be unforgivable not to mention that the current advancement of revolutionary and progressive forces is inseparable from great and heroic struggles where the working class and the communist parties have played an irreplaceable historic role. It was against them that the most savage repression was unleashed, leading in several cases to their weakening and to the emergence of petty-bourgeois forces and trends that vacillated and showed characteristic

impatience and radicalism, downplaying the role of mass action and over-rating armed struggle. They copied experiences that had taken place elsewhere and were themselves the victims of harsh repression and eventually decimated.

The history of the armed struggle in Latin America is a very complex one. On the one hand, its roots are to be found in socio-economic and political realities, as is apparent in the case of Colombia's FARC, the longest-lasting Latin American guerrilla movement which has now been officially acknowledged and is engaged in peace talks with the Colombian authorities in Havana.¹² On the other hand, there were cases of mechanical reproduction of foreign experiences (namely of the heroic guerrilla war waged in the Sierra Maestra) and external influences, in particular Maoism, that were particularly negative. It is true that the violence of repression made armed struggle to achieve freedom inevitable in many countries. And indeed, armed struggle, when combined with the people's struggle, became a decisive tool for liberation. Some important rural and urban guerrilla movements were eventually defeated, such as those in Venezuela, Bolivia (with Che Guevara) or Brazil. Others, however, led to the victory of the revolution, as happened in the cases of Cuba and Nicaragua. And in El Salvador, the powerful Farabundo Martí movement achieved freedom and eventually access to power. The role played by patriotic and progressive military in several countries confirms that armed action was a necessary component of the fight against dictatorships. Jacobo Arbenz (Guatemala), Velasco Alvarado (Peru), Juan José Torres (Bolivia) and Omar Torrijos (Panama) put forward important nationalist and anti-imperialist policies that generated tremendous popular support and expectations. However, they were unable to consolidate their power base and were eventually toppled by counter-revolutionary coups or even by US military interventions, as happened in Guatemala and in the Dominican Republic.

This brief sketch of the Latin American revolution is only intended to draw attention to those issues that Portuguese communists deem to be essential: the concrete analysis of concrete situations and the historical perspective. One should not simplify things, turn them into absolutes and, especially, one should not make dogmatic *a priori* statements. If, for example, it is true that the Latin American communist

movement is not as strong now as it was in the past, it is also true that one would not have arrived at the present circumstances without its contribution. Almost all communist parties that emerged with the revolutionary tidal wave that swept the world in the wake of the October Revolution were the builders who laid the ground for the current situation. It is not by chance that their political and ideological significance is far greater than what their numbers or electoral weight would lead us to believe – as is the case, for example, in Venezuela, Uruguay and Brazil.

Where is Latin America Going?

To acknowledge and to welcome the winds of change blowing in Latin America is not contractory with acknowledging the limits, contradictions and threats looming over the revolutionary processes and other democratic and progressive changes taking place in the continent.

The class struggle is very intense and imperialism is on the lookout. Capital, big capital associated with imperialism, has a very powerful influence over the economy, the state apparatus, the media, the education system and other structures of ideological reproduction, and the armed forces. Generally speaking, the forces leading the aforementioned processes are heterogeneous in nature, their cohesion is sometimes too closely linked to charismatic figures and they are usually subject to ideological pressures, often characterised by prejudice with regard to Marxism-Leninism, communist parties and the historical experience of socialism. Indeed, the intense activity carried out by organisations such as the Friedrich Erbert Foundation and other European reformist sectors is quite conspicuous.

From the viewpoint of Marxist-Leninist theory, as well as from the viewpoint of revolutionary experience and, first and foremost, the experience of the Latin American revolution, it is indisputable that the revolutionary process will not be consolidated until such time when key issues have been settled, including those of the revolutionary vanguard, the state, the ownership of major means of production and, decisively, the role of the popular masses not only in support of the process, but actively intervening in a conscious and creative way. The consolidation of anti-monopoly, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist transformations is an issue that has been on the political agenda of Venezuela ever

since President Hugo Chávez. Gathering the political will and the social and political strength is of vital importance, not only for the Bolivarian revolution but for Latin America as a whole.

There are question marks and uncertainties regarding the future. This has to do not just with the initiatives of counter-revolutionary forces and imperialism meddling in domestic affairs – which have, in general, been defeated whenever they have shown their heads – but also with economic developments and the way the capitalist crisis manifests itself on the periphery of the system. Another factor that has to be taken into account is the fall in oil prices, as countries like Venezuela and Bolivia are highly dependent on the revenue from oil. Counter-revolutionary forces await an opportunity to make the most of the economic hardship to stoke dissatisfaction and social unrest and to destabilise the political situation.

However, the challenges, doubts and uncertainties should not lead us to underestimate the importance of what was achieved so far for the masses who were historically exploited and oppressed (as has happened with the indigenous peasants in Bolivia, who have now proudly ‘risen from the ground’). Nor

should they make us forget that the paths of social progress, while obeying laws that have universal validity, are increasingly more diverse and influenced by the history and national specificities of individual countries. Indeed, they do not follow pre-defined ‘models’ but are rather the creative work of the masses with their revolutionary vanguard.

One should also note that liberation processes follow uneven and bumpy routes and include breakthroughs and setbacks, victories and defeats. We are living in the era, inaugurated by the October Revolution, when capitalism will be replaced by socialism; but the stages, forms and pace at which different countries move towards socialism will be very diverse, depending on the specific circumstances in each individual country and the relations and relative strengths of its various classes.

Where is Latin America going? Nothing is written in the stars, but the relations between and the relative strengths of the classes on the continent, as well as the intensification of the contradictions within the capitalist system, suggest that, alongside major threats – which include the militaristic and aggressive escalation of imperialism worldwide – there are great opportunities for progressive and revolutionary transformations. The example of Cuba,

a country that despite being only a few miles away from the most powerful imperialist country in the world and being subject to a criminal blockade, persists on the road to socialism, is a living example that there are opportunities for the revolutionary action of the masses. At the 16th International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties that was held in November 2014 in Guayaquil, Ecuador, the importance of a broad unity of anti-imperialist forces was emphasised and the two aforementioned aspects of the current situation came out very clearly. In any case, the PCP, while respecting the decisions of its Latin American comrades and seeking to learn from their experiences, will always express solidarity with their struggle, and the struggle of other revolutionary and anti-imperialist forces in Latin America and the Caribbean.

■ *Originally published in Portuguese in O Militante, the theoretical journal of the PCP, on 30 January 2015, and then in English at <http://www.pcp.pt/en/latin-america-revolutionary-developments-and-challenges> and at Marxism-Leninism Today, <http://mltoday.com/latin-america-revolutionary-developments-and-challenges>. Marginally edited here for style and points of clarification.*

Notes and References

- 1 The references to Latin America should generally be construed as including also Central America and the Caribbean.
- 2 The FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas), was a project of the Clinton Administration aimed at establishing a vast ‘free trade’ area involving 34 countries, from Canada to Argentina, but excluding Cuba. This project of US dominion was scheduled to come into effect in 2005 but was abandoned in the face of significant popular struggles against it and the opposition of countries such as Venezuela and Brazil. The US has tried to replace it with other treaties like the Alliance of the Pacific, involving countries such as Mexico, Chile, Peru, Colombia and Costa Rica.
- 3 In the wake of the defeat of the 2002 coup against Chávez, who was arrested and removed from the presidency of Venezuela for 47 hours, new attempts against the processes taking place in Bolivia (2008) and Ecuador (2010) have also failed, as has the fascist coup in Venezuela against Nicolás Maduro following his election in April 2013.
- 4 Coups arranged by the US toppled President Zelaya in Honduras in 2009 and President Lugo in Paraguay in 2012.
- 5 Despite the fact that it was forced to close down an important facility in Manta, Ecuador, the US has kept its 4th Fleet and an extended network of military bases in the region, under the pretext of fighting terrorism and drug-trafficking. This is in addition to the UK military bases in the Malvinas, and the French bases in the colonies of Guadeloupe, French Guyana and Martinique. It

- should also be noted that Colombia has recently requested accession to NATO.
- 6 A doctrine designed by US President James Monroe (1758-1831) which, under the motto “America for Americans”, aimed at eliminating the imperialist competition from European powers and at promoting a large-scale expansionist policy in the Americas.
 - 7 See <http://forodesaopaulo.org/final-declaration-of-the-20th-meeting-of-the-sao-paulo-forum/> –Ed.
 - 8 ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, was established by Cuba and Venezuela through a treaty that was signed in Havana by Presidents Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez in December 2004. Bolivia (in 2006) and Nicaragua, Dominica, Ecuador, Antigua, Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines eventually joined ALBA as well.
 - 9 According to Wikipedia: Mercosur is a trade bloc comprising Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela, with associate members Chile, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru; CELAC is the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, established in 2011 to deepen economic integration and reduce US influence; UNASUR is the Union of South American Nations, integrating Mercosur and the Andean Community of Nations, CAN; Petrocaribe is an oil alliance of many Caribbean states with Venezuela, to purchase oil on conditions of preferential payment; BancoSur is a monetary fund and lending organisation established in 2009 by

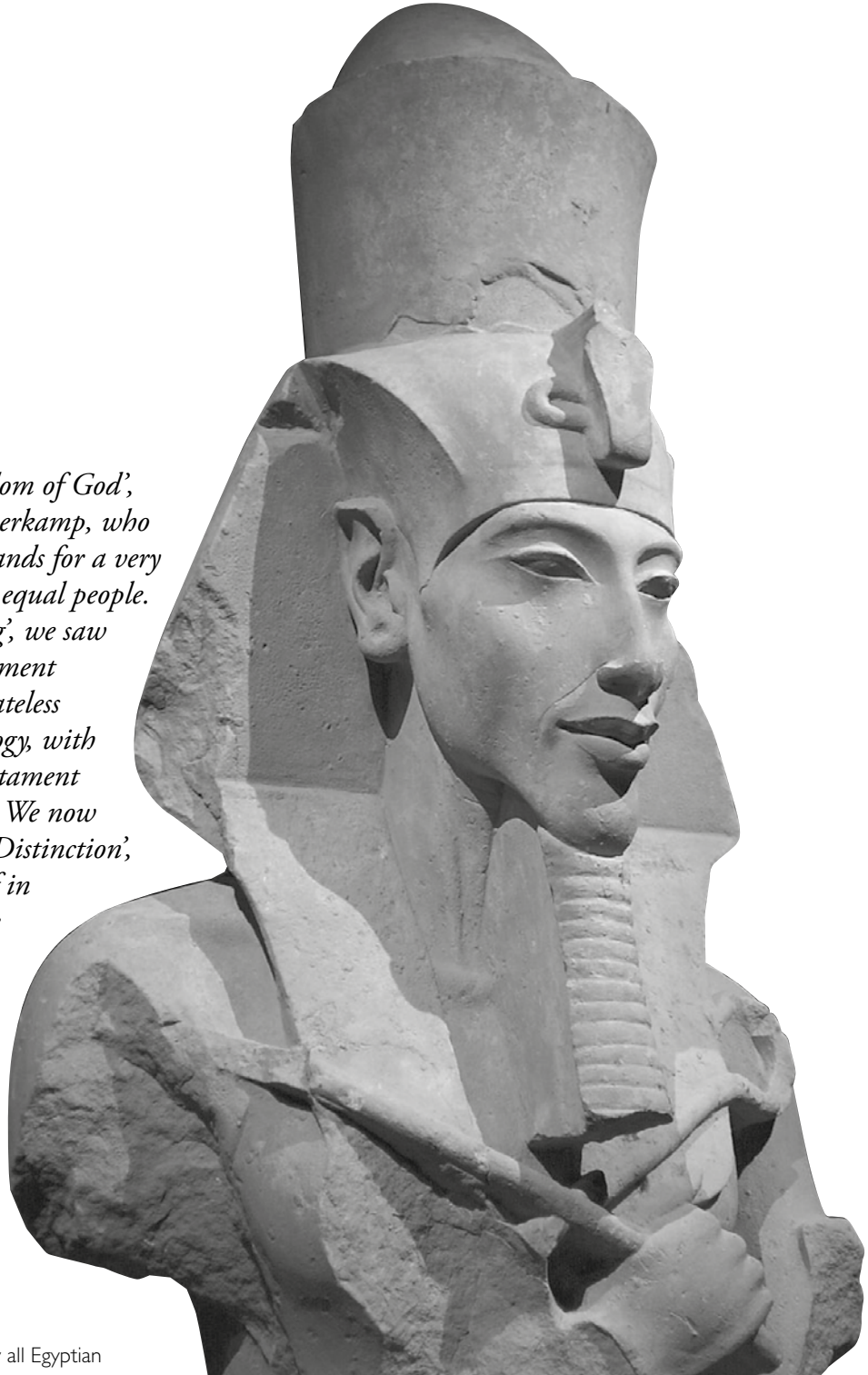
- Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela –Ed.
- 10 Although the re-election of Dilma Rousseff in October 2014 represented a victory for the popular and progressive forces, the correlation of forces in Brazil remains unfavourable in institutional terms, as the right has kept significant positions in the National Congress and the state administrations. This fact will undoubtedly influence the make-up of the government, and the inclusion in it of people associated with big capital represents a very serious threat.
 - 11 E Galeano, *The Open Veins of Latin America, Serpent’s Tail, London, 2009* –Ed.
 - 12 The roots of FARC, the guerrilla organisation that took on this designation in 1966, are to be found in the peasants’ self-defence movement of the 1840s-50s. The historical leaders include one of its founders, Manuel Marulanda (‘Tirofijo’), Jacobo Arenas and Raul Reys, who was infamously assassinated in Ecuador in an operation led by the air force. FARC-EP, which became a powerful guerrilla army, was accused of all sorts of crimes by those who have had to acknowledge its significance in the political landscape of Colombia and are now engaged in peace talks in Havana. These are difficult negotiations and the outcome is unpredictable, the more so because the government of Juan Manuel Santos has refused to suspend military operations. Be that as it may, the current negotiations reflect the complex situation in Colombia and in Latin America in general.

Oppression and Freedom in the Old Testament, Part 2



**By Thomas
Wagner**

In Section I of this article, 'The Kingdom of God', we met the Marxist theologian Ton Veerkamp, who argues that the God of the Israelites stands for a very specific political order, one of free and equal people. In Section II, 'The Briar-Bush as King', we saw how historical writings and Old Testament research present the early Israel as a stateless social order in the sense of ethnosociology, with the egalitarian contents of the Old Testament anchored in this "regulated anarchy". We now move on, in Section III, 'The Mosaic Distinction', to examine whether the Israelite belief in the one God must be made responsible for that increase of religiously based violence, with which history, especially that of Christianity and Islam, appears indissolubly bound up. Finally, Section IV, 'Political Theology', deals with the modern right-wing ideology that sees the cause for chaos and violence in the message of liberation itself.



Akhenaten, a Pharaoh who eradicated from history all Egyptian Gods but one: Aten, the Sun God.

III. THE MOSAIC DISTINCTION: AN EGYPTOLOGIST'S VIEW

IF THE LIBERATION from oppression and slavery actually constitutes the political kernel of the biblical message, which found its symbolic expression in the “Egyptian house of slavery”, an obvious question is, how is this negative picture of Egypt evaluated by experts on the kingdom of the Pharaohs?

The Egyptologist Jan Assmann belongs to that rare breed of scholars who content themselves with a niche existence in an academic ivory tower, rather than make the outcomes and questions of their research accessible to the general public. However, if we closely examine his many publications, then it soon becomes clear that he shares the view of an egalitarian basic colour of the Old Testament scriptures:

“In [ancient] Israel all ‘rule of people over people’ is subject to a fundamental reservation which can increase in specific texts to criticism, rejection, indeed scorn and derision.”¹

In these tales it is a question of:

“getting rid of the principle of a state and providing the basis for an anti-state counter-society”.²

Even the early Israelite tribal confederacy attempted to distinguish itself from the surrounding kingdoms in a fundamentally ideological way. For Assmann, therefore, the Israelite monotheism is at heart and from the outset political. Israel replaced the subjugation of the people to a king, common in the states of the ancient Orient, with the conception of a direct covenant with God, who is described as the liberator from the house of slavery. Assmann designates

this occurrence as a “transfer of political links towards God” and he is thereby quite close to the interpretation of many Bible researchers and theologians. On the other hand, a further thesis of his provoked a massive controversy among experts.

Akhenaten's Overthrow of the Gods

Assmann maintained that the violence later perpetrated, principally in the name of Christianity and Islam, had already been established in the core of monotheistic belief – because for him the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ had found its way into the realm of religion. With this difference – Assmann calls it “the Mosaic distinction” – something radically new came into the world, because the polytheistic high cultures had not until then made the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ gods. Sun and moon, heaven and earth, fertility, death, the underworld, handicraft, the art of writing, love, war and right were considered rather as so many evident constituent parts of reality, that the religious scholars of the class societies of that time started from the point that, in other states, those concepts would also be worshipped as gods, but by other names.³ In contrast, ancient Israel's belief in the one God blocked intercultural translatability and therefore mutual understanding. “One cannot translate untrue gods.”⁴ On this basis Assmann regards monotheism as indissolubly bound up with the phenomenon of religious intolerance.

Assmann sees, in 14th century BCE Egypt, a forerunner of the introduction of monotheism in early Israel, so momentous in his eyes for the later violent history of religions. At that time the Pharaoh Amenophis IV, better known as Akhenaten,

radically changed the cultural system of his country through a revolution from above.

He introduced the cult of exclusively worshipping, from that moment onwards, the sun-god Aten.⁵ He based the Aten cult on the theory that the maintenance of the total reality depended on the action of the sun.

Since the other gods appeared to him only as superfluous illusions, the Pharaoh had the temples closed, the images of the gods destroyed and their names rendered illegible. In Assmann's account, this overthrow of the gods stirred up a fearful panic in the ancient Egyptian world – since in that society people were until then convinced that not only the political and economic well-being of the country, but also the whole of natural life, depended on the fact that, in all temples of the country, the rites deemed necessary for them were unceasingly accomplished in an orderly manner:

“In Egyptian thought, the rupture of the rites signified the collapse of the social and cosmic order.”⁶

The whole population was affected by the discontinuation of the great public festivals, the only occasions on which the images of the gods left the temples, which were inaccessible to the public.

At that time Akhenaten caused the first recorded conflict in history between two fundamentally different and irreconcilable religions. However, his Amarna⁷ religion remained but a transient episode in Egyptian history, since its traces were destroyed by subsequent rulers just as radically as he had intended to deal with the old world of the gods. Nonetheless biblical monotheism, which – according to all that we know today – arose independently of the Egyptian predecessor, has developed up to the

present day an ideological power, whose effects are controversially interpreted.

The Debate over Religious Violence

It is difficult to deny that persecution of heretics, trials of witches, crusades or the bloody sides of Christian missions have been essential aspects of the history of the church, to which on the other hand we are indebted for many cultural achievements. It therefore sounds wholly plausible for Assmann to see established, in the introduction of monotheism and thereby in the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ in religion, the violence later exercised in its name:

“If this distinction is made once, then it recurs endlessly inside the spaces cleft by it. We begin with Christians and heathens, and end with Catholics and Protestants, Lutherans and Calvinists, Socinians and Latitudinarians and thousands of similar designations and sub-designations. Such cultural, religious or intellectual distinctions construct a world which is full not only of meaning, identity and orientation, but also of conflict, intolerance and violence.”⁸

However, is Assmann's thesis – that there is a particular affinity for violence in the belief in a single God, compared with the polytheistic religions of the ancient city-states and empires – really cogent? It did not take long before a few important voices from the academic world collegially but energetically formulated their counter-arguments. The theologian Erich Zenger (1939-2010) more or less claimed that Assmann overestimated the



peacefulness of polytheism, which in antiquity “after all and as a rule” legitimised “hierarchically structured ‘class societies’”⁹ and in no way prevented wars,

“which in the times of biblical Israel were unleashed by the then empires as a ‘legitimate’ means of politics – with the particular support of their gods.”

The Bible scientist Rolf Rendtorff recalled in this context that the ostracising, intolerant and violent aspects of “the Mosaic distinction” did not make themselves felt in Christianity until it was made a state religion by the Roman emperor Constantine (reigned 306-337); and from this point onwards it was bound up with the imperial power of compulsion.¹⁰ Monotheism did not show its violent side until it was received by the bureaucracy of the most powerful state of the time, and its subversive message was transformed in this way into an ideology, with which the empire was able to substantiate its striving for supremacy.

If we take the cited objections together, the following conclusion is obvious: religion, whether polytheistic or monotheistic, does not as a rule become intolerant and to a large extent violent until it enters into a connection with state rule. That applies to Akhenaten’s Aten-cult, to the polytheistic pantheons of the early Roman Empire, and to Christianity, which as Roman imperial ideology in the year 380 CE first adopted that hierarchical form which has lasted up to the present time as the Papal church.

In this context Erich Zenger pointed out that the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ in religion, in the case of the Israelite belief, is not determined formally, but rather with regard to contents. The truth of the God of

Israel does not consist in the fact that he is the only god, but rather in the “liberation from all forms of bondage”.¹¹ The biblical talk of Egypt is correspondingly not directed against polytheism, but rather against the “degradation of people and their deprivation of rights”, which were vindicated with the help of those gods of the ancient Middle Eastern class societies.

Ton Veerkamp has added the supplementary remark, that Israel’s egalitarianism was expressly directed against its neighbouring states; it forced them to accept its own basic order, but not by using force. Had Israel behaved differently, it would have been a matter of getting one religious culture accepted against all other religious cultures, which would have been insupportable:

“Such a ‘monotheism’ would be a deathly danger, and Jan Assmann would be correct: this price would be unpayable.”¹²

The Golden Calf

Assmann took up the criticism of his interpretation of the “Mosaic distinction”, of the introduction of ‘true’ and ‘false’ in religion, in a very constructive way. He moved one step towards his critics and agreed with them on one important point:

“It is not false religion, but false politics, against which Israel defined itself through the exodus from Egypt and the compact with Yahwe. False politics is Pharaonic hubris, rule as subjugation, enslavement, deprivation, abuse. Whoever experiences the law as a burden and compulsion is told: remember that you were a slave in Egypt. From the inside, considered out of the sight of the biblical

texts, monotheism is originally and primarily a religion of liberation from Egyptian oppression, and the basis of an alternative way of life, in which it is not a case of one person ruling over people, rather people combining in order to place themselves under the rule of a treaty contracted with God. The basis of monotheism, as a God-supported resistance movement, appears in the narrative-staging as the exodus from Egypt.”¹³

Assmann completely agrees with the statement that the new religion had, first and foremost, such themes as freedom, law and justice as content. On the other hand he does not at all agree with the thesis that the “Mosaic distinction” is not at all about ‘true’ and ‘false’ but about ‘free’ and ‘in bondage’ – since with ‘free’ and ‘in bondage’ it was a question of a determination, with regard to content, of what was valid as ‘true’ and ‘false’. The false religion revealed itself as humiliating, inhuman, enslaving. But after all Assmann does not want to reduce the biblical monotheism to law and justice.

Here the decisive difference in the opponents’ method of approach becomes clear. While Assmann starts from the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’, and regards that between ‘free’ and ‘in bondage’ as subordinated, his critics proceed in precisely the opposite direction. Assmann elucidates his own position with the example of the story of the Golden Calf:

“Naturally Yahwe flies into a passion over the injustice done to the poor, but in the Book of Exodus he above all loses his temper over the Golden Calf, in

whose construction no-one was oppressed and exploited.”¹³

At this point the generally sharp scholar underestimates the power of the symbolic. The question, whether anyone was actually exploited or not in the construction of the Golden Calf, is quite irrelevant. What is much more decisive is the fact that the cult around the Golden Calf acts as a code for domination. It was copied from the state cults of that time and thus stands symbolically for their power structure, taking as its basis the class society of the time.

Independently of this badly chosen example of Assmann’s, one question about the Old Testament scriptures remains to be settled: is it a matter primarily of the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ in the religion – or the alternative, between freedom and bondage? On a closer look, the two positions are actually less contradictory than they may at first appear. A simple illustrative example suffices: an Israelite semi-nomad or farmer, who gets to feel the knout of a municipal tax-collector or the sword of an Assyrian soldier, experiences the distinction between oppression and freedom, and must develop an attitude to it. He can submit, evade or – together with others – resist. However, in order not to put up with the physical threat as if it were an irresistible natural phenomenon like a thunderstorm, he must already be equipped with at least a rudimentary understanding of freedom and bondage. Only on the basis of norms in which he can put his trust, can he evaluate the violent ruling class intrusion into his life as correct or false.

In the consciousness of equality, already institutionalised in the tribal societies, and which was discussed in Part 1, Section

The Adoration of the Golden Calf by Nicolas Poussin



II of this article, there lies a point of departure, as much for practical revolt against sustained injustice as for systematic reflection on ethical questions. Given the existence of a group of specialised scholars, concerned with the composition, comparison, systematisation and canonisation of the scriptural texts, then there is certainly space for shrewd considerations over common features and differences of various cultures. If the early Israelite society is correctly described as a stateless order of freedom and equality (among men), then the Israelite God was set on the track of liberation long before religious scholars could make it the starting point of their discourse on truth.

The Distinction

In social sciences the same problem, the question of which is primary, the distinction between 'true' and 'false' or between freedom and

oppression, returns in another way: as a question about the relation between theory and practice. While the widely held positivist understanding of science may lay claim to lighting upon the statement of what is, Marxism goes an essential step beyond that – since it does not aim merely to portray social relations, but rather to help people fighting against oppression and for liberation, in practical terms to help them overcome the power relations in which they are embedded. Marxism therefore seeks not just to portray the fundamental reality, the capitalist order of inequality, but rather to work out those elements of it which provide the starting point for overcoming it in a revolutionary way. That which does not yet exist but which has already been sketched out in reality and which thereby appears possible through collective human activity, is consequently part of the truth to be developed theoretically,

as one Ernst Bloch somewhat understood it.

Nothing however is done through cognition alone. For liberation to become possible, it must also be wanted. Consequently quite a few intellectuals, who learned, during the course of the 1968 revolt and the 'red decade' which followed it, how to grasp the contradictions of capitalist society with Marxist tools, today are no longer interested in social change. Whether they have withdrawn into their private lives, resigned from the struggle or – in the worst cases – changed sides and today, with their acquired resources, carry out the business of their former political opponent, their example demonstrates quite clearly that if Marxism wants to be a theory of liberation, then it is always about more than the correct cognition of objective reality – although that is indispensable for the assessment of the relations of forces and, arising from that,

the strategy for change to be adopted.

Theoretical knowledge is not enough. The practical desire to overcome the existing power relations, and the subjective confidence that this is also possible, are also necessary. In this context Christians would perhaps speak of belief, or trust in God. For the matter at issue – the necessity of an existential distinction for liberation, *ie* socialism – the Oktoberklub¹⁴ in the German Democratic Republic found words which sound just as if they had been whispered by a biblical prophet :

*Tell me where you stand
and which road you take.
Backwards or forwards, you
must decide.
We bring the time forward
piece by piece.
You cannot enjoy with us
and with them,
since if you go into the circle,
then you are left behind.
Tell me where you stand
and which road you take.*



We have a right to recognise you. Also nodding masks are useless to us. I want to call you by the correct name and thereby to show myself your true face.

IV. Political Theology: The Perspective of Right-Wingers

Nine years ago the German magazine *Der Spiegel* surprised the readers of its Christmas edition with the front-cover title ‘God came out of Egypt’.¹⁵ The feature article traced the origin of biblical monotheism back to the activities of a group of Yahwe priests, who in a sombre temple secretly pulled strings, indulged in barbaric sacrificial cults, anointed their earlobes with ram’s blood, and as bigoted followers of the eternal were not very particular with the truth. In that regard Jan Assmann’s articles served as academic authority for the stringing together of anti-Jewish clichés, disguised as a popular scientific presentation. *Der Spiegel* truncated Assmann’s carefully and cautiously undertaken comparisons of the parallels and distinctions between the monotheism of Akhenaten and of the Israelite belief in one God into the as much catchy as false assertion that “the Jews” had “copied” their belief from the Egyptians.

Assmann, esteemed as a theoretical stimulus far beyond the boundaries of his own subject area, protested against the misleading reproduction of his theses and in an open letter distanced himself from the article:

“The Bible does not speak of ‘Jews’, rather of Israel or the ‘children of Israel’, when it is a matter of the representative group of the religion imparted by Moses; and scholarship takes into account

this terminological circumspection, in that it speaks of Israelites or Hebrews. The talk of ‘Jews’ does not appear until the period of the Second Temple (5th century BCE), and that of ‘Judaism’ in the sense of a religion alongside Christianity and Islam not until late antiquity (2nd/3rd century CE). The Jews are therefore not responsible for their origin, but rather, exactly as with Christians, only for their association with the Hebrew Bible.”¹⁶

Criticism of Religion from the Right

At that time *Der Spiegel* rejected the criticism of its cover story and defended it as the expression of a standpoint critical of religion and myths. In fact it has much in common with that form of religion criticism advanced by the authors of the radical right from the nineteenth century, as an ideological weapon against the Enlightenment, democracy and socialism. They imagine they detect the roots of the striving for freedom and equality – which they oppose – in the belief in one God, who freed Israel from the Egyptian house of slavery. As stated in one 2011 essay, “Jewish monotheism”, through its “domination-critical absolutism of truth”, has torn to threads the essential connection of state and religion, and put a religious fanaticism into the world, which discriminates against the opponent,

“in case of emergency, as an enemy of God worthy of destruction, whom it is justified to massacre enthusiastically in holy wars.”¹⁷

In that essay the political commentator Siegfried Gerlich, a supporter of

the revisionist historian Ernst Nolte, insisted upon outbidding the distorted presentation of Assmann’s reflections by *Der Spiegel*: Israel’s aim had been “the destruction of the heathens, and world domination”. Under the influence of Jews who, like Ernst Bloch¹⁸, have renounced their faith, “Bolshevik-hardened” Marxism had in the long run developed its “anarchistic disruptive force” in crisis periods of capitalism.

While Gerlich suggests that the current criticism of domination and inequality ultimately goes back to a ‘Jewish-Bolshevik’ conspiracy, which began in the time described in the Old Testament, he actually moves totally within the perspective of a polemic, already centuries-old, against the alleged subversive activity of Jewish intellectuals. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) tended to attribute the democratic tendencies in history – repugnant to him – to the unholy activities of a Jewish priestly caste, which had pulled strings in secret and incited the masses repeatedly against their legitimate lords and masters:

“Everything which is done on Earth against ‘the nobility’, ‘the powerful’, ‘the masters’, ‘the possessors of power’ is not worth mentioning in comparison with what the Jews have done against them.”¹⁹

Transversal Racism

In that context Nietzsche did not consider himself to be a propagandist of that biologically based antisemitism which in his time enjoyed a growing popularity. He despised Judaism above all because he believed he had recognised in it the ideological roots of modern egalitarianism. Nietzsche raised no objections

against Jews who belonged to the upper classes and who oppressed the proletariat just as disparagingly as he himself did. His dislike did not apply to the Jews as supposed members of a biologically defined race but rather to the wage-earners, the needy, the residents of urban slums, who did not want to be satisfied with their assigned station in society, and above all to all those who encouraged them to fight for their rights: socialist spokespersons and intellectuals.

Like many bourgeois authors of his time, he tended to devalue the poor as human beings and to describe them as members of a supposed lower “race”. The Italian philosopher Domenico Losurdo designates this process as *transversal racialisation*:

“Nietzsche’s racialisation of social-political conflict is, at least as regards Europe, transversal, *ie* it traverses and tears apart every national community, in that it opposes to one another the masters and the servants, the well-behaved and the wayward, the aristocrats and the rabble.”²⁰

His contempt towards the lower strata of the population, at the same time as his admiration of supposedly aristocratic virtues, also determined Nietzsche’s opinions of the ‘Jews’ as well as his reading of the Old Testament. While he was able to take a lively interest in the description of the violent conquest of Canaan by the Israelites, which he interpreted as the expression of a heroic attitude of domination, he rejected the message of liberation bound up with the exodus from Egypt:

“Nietzsche hates and despises the prophets,

the priests and in addition the Jewish mob, which calls Christianity into life, and he repeatedly argues that the biblical commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is obsolete and to be discarded as threatening our existence; on the other hand he extols the Old Testament story of the conquest of Canaan and the extermination of its inhabitants.²¹

Aristocratic Radicalism

Nietzsche’s “slave revolt in morality”, the history of subversion by a “Jewish priestly caste”, which in the form of modern intellectuals was – he claims – responsible for the victory of the French Revolution over the aristocracy, and the movement of contemporary socialism, begins for him with the Old Testament. In his polemic critical of religion, *The Antichrist*, he covers the “socialist mob”, the anarchists and the Christians equally with his hatred – since all these groups threatened to demolish his conception of the distinction between the rulers and the ruled. He on the contrary was of the opinion that

“The source of wrong is never unequal rights, but the claim of ‘equal rights.’²²

Among contemporary philosophers it is above all Peter Sloterdijk who is making Nietzsche’s elite conception of domination palatable to a middle-class audience, which on account of the permanent crisis of present-day capitalism fears its own decline and is therefore attempting to differentiate itself from the lower strata. Like Nietzsche before him, Sloterdijk also traces back every revolt from below, every dream of a better life, to nothing other than

the sublimation of hate and revenge.

In his book *Zorn und Zeit* (translated as *Rage and Time*²³) he brings in the concept of the social justification of the wrath of the Old Testament God, and denounces the striving for equality by the lower classes as mere envy, perpetuating the

“great Nietzschean arc of resentment of the ‘wrath prophesy of Judaism’, via the Christian ‘theology of wrath’ to the French Revolution and its anarchistic and socialist radicalisations”.²⁴

Basically, as this darling philosopher of German letters suggests, genocide is already sketched out in the concept of social justification:

“Wherever envy slips over the garment of social justification, there comes in train a desire for degradation, which is already the half of annihilation.”²⁵

Radical Affirmation of Rule

While Nietzsche sees the demand for equal rights – decisively rejected by him – finding expression for the first time historically in the liberation message of the Old Testament, he connects his desired order of unequal rights with the imperial rule of ancient Rome. His “aristocratic radicalism” (Losurdo) is based on the notion that all culture necessarily rests on slavery. The Roman slave-owning society accordingly approached his socially ideal picture. He brought the opposite organising principles into the short formula:

“Rome against Judea, Judea against Rome.”²⁶

The constitutional law expert Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) also expressly understood himself as a ‘Roman’ in this radical rule-

affirming sense.²⁷ For him, whose reactionary teaching experienced a remarkable renaissance in reunited Germany after 1990, ‘Rome’ represented the principle of an order guaranteed by an authoritarian state. On the other hand he brought the ‘Jews’ into connection with those egalitarian strivings, which he considered as a serious threat to this order. Because liberal democrats, anarchists, social-democrats, socialists and communists strive for freedom and equal rights for the great majority of the population, in his eyes they undermine the state cohesion in a fundamental way.

The French political commentator Alain Benoist, one of the most important ideologists of the contemporary radical right, agrees with Schmitt that in the Old Testament it is a matter of “challenging human domination in principle – and not by chance any old expression of it.”²⁸ However both Benoist and Schmitt see an attack on human orderliness in each basic criticism of the principle of domination. In this context Benoist regards himself as a decisive opponent of the teaching of equality:

“There are those who reject communism; moreover those who also spurn liberalism, because it has given rise to the aforementioned people; and finally those who also spurn Christianity, because it is of the same die by which both first-mentioned came forth in worldly form. We belong to the third category: to that of the consistent opponents of the dogma of equality.”²⁹

The State as God

While Benoist recommends a back-consciousness to the heathen religions of old

Europe, in order to pose a domination-compatible alternative belief system in opposition to the allegedly life-threatening “Judeo-Christianity”, and in this way to stop the disintegration of society – otherwise appearing as unavoidable – Carl Schmitt placed his standard on the continuing ideological power of that Christianity which had been transformed in the late period of the Western Roman Empire from a subversive underground movement into a state-sustaining institution.

Because, in Schmitt’s ultimately irrational worldview, there would be no order without domination, and no domination without reference to God, only a model of “political theology” (the title of his 1922 book) oriented towards the standard of the Roman Catholic church still promised salvation before the threatening chaos.

His juridical conception of domination amounts to nothing other than the worship of power – *ie* for Schmitt God and state might are two sides of one and the same coin. At this point it is appropriate to allow the “crown jurist of the Third Reich”³⁰ to get a chance to speak for himself:

“God is the supreme power and the supreme being. All power is from him and is and remains in its essence divine and good. If the Devil should have power, then so also is this power, insofar as it is just power, divine and good. Only the will of the Devil is evil. But also, despite this always evil satanic will, power remains in itself divine and good.”³¹

Given a bourgeois society torn apart by opposing interests, only an authoritarian state, which is divine and good, because and insofar as it shows itself powerful, appears to Schmitt to be a dependable



guarantee of social peace. Roman Catholicism therefore offered him the suitable model. That Christianity, first driven underground, and then gaining mass approval – difficult to suppress – was first privileged under the Emperor Constantine and then made into an exclusive state worship under his successors:

“Christianity became the state ideology of that empire whose radical alternative it had originally sought to be.”³²

In the form of the Papal church it carried the domination-heritage of the Roman Empire right through to the present day.

Latin Fascism

Regarding Catholicism, Schmitt values precisely this

imperial heritage, the ‘Roman’, *ie* that particular culture of subordination which emerged from its linkage with the authoritarian state. At the apex of his book *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*³³ he commends the hierarchy with the Pope as a necessary bulwark against the “fantastic wildness of an unbridled prophethood.”³⁴ Schmitt’s God is thus not the biblical God of liberation, described by Ton Veerkamp, nor the God of the anti-imperial prophets nor that of the original Christians. His God is the God of an unlimited and infallible imperial might. Schmitt’s total constitutional law teaching, which he employed against the democratic constitution of the Weimar Republic, rests on his extremist interpretation of order, that

it would simply be good according to its essence.

Schmitt’s conviction that the Catholic Church as a Roman institution provided an important historical contribution to the suppression of the striving for equality of the masses – also inspired over and again by the biblical texts themselves – was one shared with many fascists of his time. Thus Charles Maurras (1868-1952), the founder of Action Française, was somewhat of the opinion that ancient Rome had created western civilisation and that the second, Catholic, Rome had preserved it from Judeo-Christian destruction.

Numerous Catholic theologians and church leaders hoped to be able to put a stop to communism through a world dictatorship of the church. Carl Schmitt on the other hand believed, at least

for a time, to have found an acceptable successor to the Roman Empire in the murderous Führer state of Nazi fascism. At the end of a speech which he delivered to a conference of the Reich group of university teachers of the Nazi solicitors’ league, he stated:

“In that I resist the Jews’, says our Führer Adolf Hitler, ‘I struggle for the undertaking of the masters.’”³⁵

For Carl Schmitt, the principle of domination itself is the God whom it is worth serving.

■ *Translated (with additional explanatory end-notes) by the Editor from the German original text in junge Welt of 28 and 29 December 2012, and published with permission.*

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26 Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, *op cit*, p 299.

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28 A de Benoist, *Heide sein: Zu einem neuen Anfang – die europäische Glaubensalternative (To be a Heathen: Towards a new beginning – the alternative European belief)*, Grabert, Tübingen 1982, p 203.

29 A de Benoist, *Kulturrevolution von rechts: Gramsci und die Nouvelle Droite (Cultural Revolution from the Right: Gramsci and the New Right)*, Sinus Verlag, Tübingen 1983, p 144.

30 C E Frye, *Carl Schmitt’s Concept of the Political*, in *The Journal of Politics*, Vol 28, no 4 (November 1966), pp 818-830.

31 Cited in Faber, *op cit*, p 42.

32 Veerkamp, *Die Welt anders*, *op cit*, p 30.

33 G L Ulmen, trans, Greenwood Press, 1996. Original publication 1923.

34 Cited in Faber, *op cit*, p 45

35 Cited in *Das Plagiat: der Völkische Nationalismus der ‘Jungen Freiheit’ (Plagiarism: The racial nationalism of ‘Young Freedom’)*, H Kellershohn, ed, DISS-Verlag, Duisburg, 1994, p 187.

The Class Struggle versus the Caste System in India and Britain

By Dyal Bagri
 Indian Workers'
 Association (GB)

THE CASTE SYSTEM is an age-old phenomenon that has haunted Indian society since ancient times. Although it exists in many South Asian countries, its deep-rooted religiously justified hierarchical social norm is unique to Indian society. The tight grip of the system provides feudal lords, religious leaders and bourgeois elitists with the power to strengthen the inequalities and injustices that serve and protect class interests. Letting go of the caste system, they fear, will lead to the downfall of contemporary feudalist/capitalist systems.

The *Manusmriti*, or 'Laws of Manu' (the progenitor of mankind), divided Indian society into four sections better known as *varnas*, on which today's caste system is founded and designed; and it was strengthened and sanctified by Hindu religious texts and *Vedic* scripts. The *Manusmriti* positioned *shudras* (lower caste), *atishudras* (lowest of the lower castes) and women into an unequivocally unequal and miserable existence. Compared with social class, caste is hereditary, compulsory and endogamous. The worst affected by caste-related oppression have been *Dalits*



(all lower castes), *shudra* and *atishudra*, *adivasis* (natives), scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.¹

The rules of the *Manusmriti* have prohibited all these groups and women the rights of property-owning, education and knowledge. They are treated like sub-humans, forced to exist on the foulest food often left over and thrown away by the higher *varnas*.² They are not allowed to draw water from the common village wells. They are prevented from entering temples – except to shatter their human dignity.³ They can only access menial jobs on behalf of the higher castes – including manually cleaning up and carrying away human excrement. They are deprived of all sources of economic mobility. They are classed as sinners in Indian society, not even allowed to be buried/cremated in common ground and not allowed to live in the main village. In other words, social apartheid based on the caste system exists in every village.

Thus the Dalits have been subjected to social exclusion as well as economic discrimination. In the 21st century, when India has joined the world race for scientific achievements, travelling into space, Dalits continue to suffer inequality, economic and social oppression and discrimination. Instead of weakening such a system, the feudal and bourgeois classes as well Hindu *Pundits*⁴ are very active in protecting the status quo.

In independent India, the bourgeois national parties and their leaders promised to replace the social hierarchical system with a socialist system, to provide equal opportunity for everyone. Unfortunately, after 67 years of independence, these bourgeois leaders have miserably failed to bring about even basic changes in the caste system. The *Manusmriti* and the accompanying economic structural relations are still very strong. People from Dalit castes are still suffering social segregation and are deprived of economic sources for social mobility. Gang rapes and mass murder of members of scheduled castes and tribes by upper castes are a norm in many parts of India, and the justice system has failed to protect them and/or bring the perpetrators to justice. No attempt is made to provide the infrastructure for basic human needs. The social reforms by bourgeois leaders have remained limited to vote-grabbing exercises.

In the 19th and 20th centuries a number of social reformers, such as Dr B R Ambedkar, Sri Narayan Guru, Jyotiba

(Jotirao) Phule, Periyar E V Ramaswamy Naicker and others, led many movements against the caste system and caste oppression, struggling for emancipation of Dalits. However, these struggles remained narrowly concerned with social reforms and did not address the crucial and deep-rooted issue of economic dependency, neither were they made part of the wider class struggle. Hence these struggles made no attempt to educate the general public about the impact of the caste system on those at the lower end of the spectrum. These campaigners appear only to have been interested in making some social changes within the caste hierarchy. They did not wish to attack the religious doctrine that teaches disadvantaged people to accept their social position as their fate and the will of the God, and/or that it was the result of their past deeds to be born in a lower caste. Hence the campaigns did nothing to the break the centuries-old caste-based hierarchical system.

On the other hand the Hindu fundamentalist organisations *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS)⁵ and *Sangh Parivar*⁶ have vigorously opposed the reform movement and played a reactionary role against it. Promoting the Brahminical divisive philosophy, RSS opposed amendments to the Hindu Code Bill after independence. Following in the same footsteps, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP)⁷ – currently in power – has resisted implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations.⁸ Moreover, atrocities against Muslims, Dalits, *adivasis* and Christians have increased in the states where the BJP has been in power. The communal riots at Godhra in Gujarat in 2002 are a classic example of such reactionary resistance, with the victims still waiting for justice while some of the perpetrators are enjoying high positions of power. There is no doubt that caste oppression, class exploitation and communalism are interlinked, and that the struggles against these and for abolition of the caste system will have to be fought in a linked manner.

As mentioned above, Dalits continue to suffer the impacts of untouchability, and social and economic diaspora, despite the outlawing of caste-based discrimination. Growing consciousness among the Dalits has led them to struggle for emancipation, but the activists of such movements have met with brutal atrocities. These brutalities, instead of crushing the minds and souls of the activists, have made them even more determined and they are bravely

continuing to assert their democratic right to resist the oppression their people have been forced to bear for centuries.

On the other hand, bourgeois political and religious leaders continue to perpetuate the caste divisions for their narrow interests and for increasing their vote banks. These Pundits of Indian society, especially the Congress Party, have exploited and abused the sentiments of the people from lower castes by making false promises of equal rights. For example, the Reservation⁹ policy, while it has worked to raise living standards to a certain extent and for certain sections, has played a major part in weakening and even crushing the struggle for a casteless/classless, equal and just society.

In order to progress, the capitalist system requires the weakening of semi-feudal social conditions, such as those of a caste-based divided society, and the strengthening of the divisions of a class society. The Indian bourgeoisie opted to compromise, and perpetuated both the caste and the class systems, with Dalits being predominantly part of the labouring classes as well as from the lower caste. For the Indian bourgeois classes, the caste and class systems provide perfect conditions for dual exploitation of working people and for never letting them unite for common struggles.

Owing to the fostering of the caste system, and imperialist-dictated policies of liberalism, privatisation and globalisation, the Indian bourgeois classes have been working to aggravate further the socio-economic problems of all downtrodden people, especially those of Dalit communities. The latter are forced to live and work in sub-human conditions. They are denied basic infrastructures for essential life resources, such as travelling safely to and from work, safe drinking water, food and housing facilities. They are forced to do menial jobs with no guarantee of a minimum wage or safe working conditions. The drive towards privatisation of nationalised industries and state-led institutions has hit the Reservation policy hard, while the closures of thousands of factories and mills have pushed millions of people into unemployment, leading to further economic hardship. This trend is evident in agrarian rural communities also. Furthermore, growing commercialisation of health and education services has moved access to these services away from the reach of

lower castes and classes.

Working to unite working people in such fragmented, divisive and hostile conditions is a challenge for the democratic and progressive movements. It has become a duty for such movements to understand that the caste and class struggles are linked and have to be fought as such. The progressive parties that are championing such struggles will have to raise awareness among the masses of the historical, political and socio-economic perspectives of oppression of downtrodden people, while acknowledging the differences in caste and class. They will have to raise the awareness of all sections of society about the evils of the caste system, as well as expose the caste-based, communal, and capitalist forces working to the limit to maintain and strengthen such evils. While it is true that socialism is ultimately the only way forward for eradicating caste and class systems, and for an equal and just society, we cannot wait until then. The progressive parties will have to be aware of those non-governmental organisations who exploit the sentiments of Dalits and other downtrodden masses in order to isolate them from the class struggle, thereby weakening the class struggle and playing into the hands of imperialist powers.

The Indian Workers Association and the Caste System in Britain

We, the Indian people in Britain, have brought semi-feudal values with us. The phenomenon of the caste system is one such value. We are carrying the burden of the caste-based status quo. Religious Pundits, such as Sikhs, are tirelessly claiming that caste has no place in their religion while the Hindu leaders claim that such a system does not exist among British Indian communities and has no place in 21st century Indian society. However, behind the public eye these Pundits are actively promoting this divisive system.

In Hinduism the *Manusmriti* are read as part of the Vedic prayers, and Manu is worshiped as God (*Manu Bhagwan*¹⁰); while, in the name of the Sikh religious rules, the *Rahit Nama*, the caste system is being perpetuated by the Sikh Religious High Command in Amritsar, and adapted by Sikh shrines in Britain and other countries alike. Marriages are arranged within one's caste. Every effort is made to prevent young people from choosing their life partners from a different caste and/or religion,

especially from a lower caste. Children, from an early age, and with continuous reinforcement, are taught the hierarchy of the caste system, and are encouraged to be proud of their caste.

Discrimination in places of worship has always been a normal practice. Dalits feel they are treated as sub-human and are prevented from taking part in religious activities. Even the common religious festivals are celebrated separately depending on one's caste. This is particularly evident among Gujarati communities. These practices, in the hope of maintaining personal dignity, have resulted in caste-based Sikh temples and Hindu temples.

The advanced British bourgeoisie has no doubt helped people from the lower castes to raise their economic and social conditions and to be able to live a dignified life. People are able to attend the same educational institutions, and compete for jobs for which they may have the same level of qualification, training and experience. However, some surveys have suggested that Indian entrepreneurs discriminate against Dalits, from recruitment to promotion, and favour those from higher castes, even if their qualification, training and experience do not match the requirements of the job.

Dalit activists, together with some other progressive movements, have taken the campaign for legal protection against such practices to the United Nations and the House of Commons. After 4 years, the British government has finally accepted that caste-based discrimination happens in Britain; and it has finally agreed to outlaw such practices by extending the scope of Clause 9 of the Equality Act (2010). This is a move in the right direction, and it provides a platform for victims to challenge discriminatory practices in court. The decision to include caste-based discrimination within clause 9 of the Equality Act has successfully brought the matter into public debate and it has proven to have shaken the ground under the feet of religious Pundits, forcing them to examine their practices. However, we have to be vigilant and be aware of how to ensure that the law does not do a disservice to our younger generation, who are working so hard to challenge the centuries-old system.

The British government:

- is dragging its feet over implementing Clause 9 of the Equality Act;

- has no programme plan for empowering victims;
- has no plan for educating those responsible for implementing the Act, such as the judiciary, police and so on;
- is reluctant to give powers to those responsible for implementing the legislation;
- is reluctant to invest in the resources necessary for successfully implementing Clause 9.

Enlightened individuals and the progressive and democratic movement will have to determine that this fight is not separate from the wider class struggle.

The Indian Workers Association (GB) has a proud history of fighting against all forms of discrimination, including class, caste, gender, race, religion and creed. The Association has consistently been forging a broad front to transform the fight against the divisive racist, religious, fascist and communal forces into wider class struggles. The Indian Workers Association will continue to fight these forces and will always stand by all downtrodden people nationally and internationally.

Notes and References

- 1 The *scheduled castes* and *scheduled tribes* are official designations given in the Indian Constitution to various groups of long-disadvantaged people.
- 2 For further information, see Stalin K's documentary film, *India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart*, 2007.
- 3 The Sri Subrahmanya temple in Karnataka is a classic example of such an insult. The temple operates the age-old practice of *made snana*, the act of devotees rolling on plantain leaves on the temple floor, once Brahmins and other devotees have taken food from the leaves. The act of *made snana* is claimed to get rid of *naga dosha*, an alleged curse for killing snakes in a previous life.
- 4 In this context, a *Pundit* is a Hindu or Sikh religious scholar or teacher.
- 5 Literally, 'National Patriotic Organisation'.
- 6 Literally, 'Family of Sangh', the family of Hindu nationalist organisations started by the RSS or inspired by its ideas.
- 7 Literally, 'Indian People's Party'.
- 8 The Mandal Commission, headed by Indian Parliamentarian B P Mandal, was established in 1979 by the then Janata Party (JP) government, with a mandate to "identify the socially or educationally backward". Its recommendation to redress the problems have still not all been implemented.
- 9 The process of setting aside a proportion of seats in Indian government institutions for members of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other 'backward' classes.
- 10 = 'Lord Manu'.

BOOK REVIEW

Losurdo on Stalin: A Review

Review by Roland Boer

DOMENICO LOSURDO'S well-reasoned and elaborately researched book, *Stalin: The History and Critique of a Black Legend*, has not as yet been translated into English. Originally published in Italian in 2008, it has been translated into French, Spanish and German.¹ Since I am most comfortable with French, I set out to read the 500+ page book – as bed-time reading.

But first, let me set the context for Losurdo's philosophical project, which has been admirably outlined in a translation of a piece by Stefano Azzarà.² This project has a few main features. First, he has developed a systematic criticism of liberalism's bloody, particularist, racist and supremacist origins.³ In this 'counter-history', he argues that bourgeois democracy is by no means a natural outcome of liberalism, but rather the result of a continued struggle of the excluded from the limited realm of liberalism. Further, and as part of his wider project, he has also explored the dialectical tension between universal claims and the limited particularisms from which they arise. In this light, he has explored the tensions and qualitative leaps in the German tradition of idealist philosophy, with a particular focus on Kant

and Hegel. Third, he applies this criticism to the Marxist tradition, which ran into significant trouble through its wildly universalist and utopian claims and the unexpected limitations that emerged during the constructions of socialism after the revolution.

Although he draws on Gramsci to argue for Marxism as a patient and pragmatic project in which everything will not be achieved in rush, he tellingly sees the example of China as an excellent example of what he means. Putting aside any pre-established blueprints for socialism, or indeed the "utopia-state of exception spiral", it realises the gradual nature of project. Not afraid to face the power of capitalism, as well as its many problems, it simultaneously – in a massive and sustained 'New Economic Project' that defies all orthodoxies – proceeds to construct a socialist constitutional state that is working towards a socialist market for the production and redistribution of wealth. Here is, then, Italy's leading philosopher in the Marxist tradition vouching for a China that may well reconfigure and refound the Marxist tradition.

By now, Losurdo's controversial and provoking theses should begin to be a

little clearer. The Stalin book is yet another instance of his ability to take on unexpected and supposedly 'dangerous' topics and thoroughly recast one's understanding. Is not Stalin, after all, the epitome of the paranoid dictator ruling by his personal whim and destroying millions of lives in the process? Is he not the mirror-image of Hitler and thereby a travesty of the Marxist tradition, as so many Marxists would have us believe? For Losurdo, this is an extraordinary caricature, so he sets out to explore how and why it developed and then to demolish it. This entails a complete reset of the mindset that unthinkingly condemns Stalin before any sustained analysis.

The book has eight chapters that are simultaneously philosophical and historical. Given the fact that it is not available in English, I outline the arguments of each chapter.

Introduction: The Turning Point in the History of Stalin

This covers the period from the worldwide admiration and appreciation of Stalin's pivotal role in the defeat of Hitler to the moment when Khrushchev's 'secret report' was delivered. For the rest

of the book, he juxtaposes these two images in constantly changing formats. One appreciates Stalin for what he actually did; the other condemns him for what he supposedly did.

1. How to Send a God to Hell: The Khrushchev Report

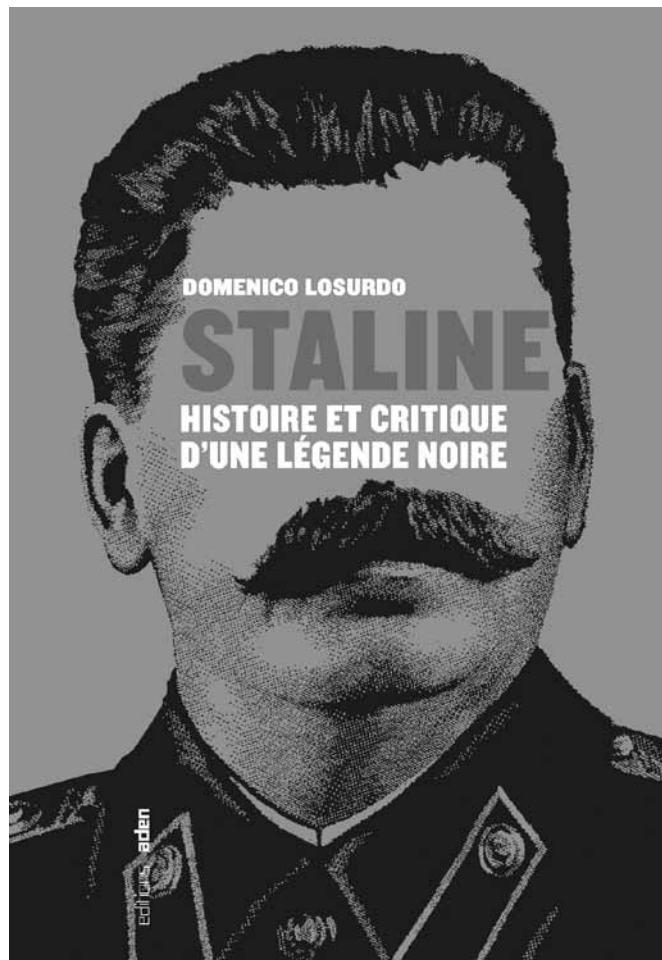
This chapter is a detailed criticism of the 'secret report', given by Khrushchev after Stalin's death. This is a useful complement to Grover Furr's *Khrushchev Lied*⁴, with a focus on the politically motivated distortions by Khrushchev, who depicted Stalin as a "capricious and degenerate human monster", and created the myths of Stalin's abject reactions to Hitler's attack, his anti-semitism, the cultivation of his own personality cult and much more.

2. Bolshevik Ideological Conflict in Relation to the Civil War

This is a more philosophical chapter, dealing with what Losurdo calls the "dialectic of Saturn". By this he means the pattern of conflict and struggle in which the way the Bolsheviks came to power continued to influence their dealings in power: "the history of Bolshevism turns

STALINE: Histoire et critique d'une légende noire

By DOMENICO LOSURDO
 (Les Éditions Aden, Bruxelles, 2011, 532 pp, pbk, €30. ISBN 978-2805900631)



itself against Soviet power”. This revolutionary struggle continued, in relation to external and especially internal opponents. And so the means for resolving such a struggle became – internally – both purges and plots to overthrow the government. The Trotsky-Bukharin-Kamenev plot was therefore part of the internal logic of revolutionary power and very real. In this way we may understand the Red Terror, which is one aspect of what Losurdo calls three civil wars: the one against the international counterrevolution via the White armies; the second against the rich peasants (kulaks) during the collectivisation drive; the third against the internal plot of Trotsky and others.

3. Between the Twentieth Century and the *Longue Durée*, Between the History of Marxism and the History of Russia: The Origins of ‘Stalinism’
 Again philosophical, this chapter argues for two main points. The first is that Russia was undergoing a long “time of troubles” from the late nineteenth century. The state was gradually collapsing, social institutions were disintegrating and the economy was in

free-fall. Continuous warfare played a role, from the Russo-Japanese War to the First World War. In this light, the major achievement of the communists was to reconstruct the state. Not just any state, but a strong socialist state. Needless to say, this required immense energy and not a little brilliance. At the centre was Stalin.

Second, Losurdo develops his argument for the problematic nature of the communist universal. Bred out of the particularities of the Russian revolution and its situation, it developed an “ideal socialism” that is still to come and to which one strives. This in turn produced the perpetual state of exception under which the Soviet Union found itself. For Losurdo, Stalin may have at times been subject to

this universal ideal, but less so that others like Trotsky and Kautsky, who criticised Stalin for not living up to the ideal. Instead, Stalin’s various strategies, such as continuing the New Economic Project for a while, the collectivisation project, the restoration of the soviets, and the efforts to foster socialist democracy indicate a significant degree of practical concerns.

4. The Complex and Contradictory Course of the Stalin Era

As the title suggests, Losurdo continues his philosophical analysis of contradictions, now focusing on: socialist democracy and the Red Terror; bureaucracy and the “furious faith” of the new socialist order; planned economy and the extraordinary flexibility of worker initiatives (so much so

that the workers would have been regarded as unruly and undisciplined in capitalist industries); and the role of a “developmental dictatorship” in contrast to totalitarianism. Of particular interest in this chapter is the systematic refutation of the alignment between Soviet gulags and the Nazi concentration camps, in which the former sought to produce restored citizens, while the latter simply sought to destroy ‘sub-humans’. Here Losurdo begins a theme that becomes stronger as the book progresses, namely, that fascism is much closer to the liberal powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Much more is said on this connection.

5. Repression of History and Construction of Mythology: Stalin and Hitler as Twin Monsters

A long chapter, where Losurdo now begins to show how the “black legend” of Stalin developed. A central feature, thanks to Hannah Arendt, is what Losurdo calls the *reductio ad Hitlerum*. Two key items are supposed to show the “elective affinity” between Stalin and Hitler: the so-called ‘Holodomor’, the Ukrainian holocaust that



BOOK REVIEW

is supposed to be similar to the Nazi holocaust, and Stalin's antisemitism. Here he shows that the Holodomor is a piece of historical fiction (developed above all by the old Cold War warrior, Robert Conquest) and that the famine was the result of the United Kingdom's Russian Goods (Import Prohibition) Act 1933. On antisemitism he spends a good deal of time, after which it is perfectly clear that Stalin was anything but. Stalin repeatedly condemned antisemitism in no uncertain terms, to the point of being – one of the few in the world at the time – an enthusiastic supporter of the state of Israel. Even more, the establishment of the “affirmative action empire” in the Soviet Union ensured that Jews, among many other ethnic groups, were protected and fostered under the law, so much so that a significant number held posts in the government apparatus. Also in this chapter is a further development of the close connections between Hitler and ‘Western liberalism’, especially in terms of anti-semitism. Churchill in particular was a bigoted racist and white supremacist, and Roosevelt was also sympathetic. Indeed, they and others contrived to turn, through ‘appeasement’, Hitler's attention eastward, with the aim of using Hitler to destroy the USSR.

6. Psychopathology, Morality and History in Reading the Stalin Era

This chapter carries on the arguments of the previous one, especially in relation to the *reductio ad Hitlerum*, where Arendt once again comes in for some sustained criticism. It also deals with the common portrayal of Stalin's paranoia, showing that the continued threats to the USSR – such as systemic sabotage and bombing of key industrial

sites, spying, fostering coups, and simple economic sanctions – were hardly the products of a suspicious mind.

7. The Image of Stalin Between History and Mythology

This brief chapter continues to trace the way the myth of a brutal dictator developed. Not only is he interested in the polarisation of Stalin, but also in the contradictions of the myth as it has been perpetrated and repeated since the initial work of Trotsky, Khrushchev and Arendt. But this is not the first time such diabolisation has happened in relation to revolutions. Losurdo closes the chapter by showing how it also took place in relation to the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century – especially The Terror and in relation to Robespierre.

8. Diabolisation and Hagiography in Reading the Contemporary World

Losurdo closes by showing how the process of diabolisation continues in relation to more recent communist revolutions: China, Cambodia, Haiti. Here the ideological warfare is coupled with brutal repressions, especially in Haiti, which was not large enough to resist the invasion of counterrevolutionary forces. China, however, was able to withstand the consistent raids and bombings that the United States undertook through its air bases on Taiwan, although it did suffer through what may be called an ‘economic atom bomb’. The economic blockade of China was specifically designed to leave China – already with a destroyed economy from the Japanese invasion and a long revolutionary civil war – far behind economically. The cost was in millions of lives

from starvation. Not without satisfaction does Losurdo note that China is overcoming the strenuous effects of the United States and its allies. In the end, however, the main purpose of this chapter is to focus on a favoured theme: the continued bloodthirstiness of ‘Western liberal’ powers.

What are we to make of Losurdo's argument?

I was less taken with his efforts to show how close Nazism is to Western liberalism. This is a theme he has developed elsewhere, and while the points are often well made, they at times tended to dominate his argument. To counter a false image of Stalin by pointing out that the accusers were really the guilty ones is not always the best move to make. However, Losurdo does offer some real strengths in his work, relating to Stalin at war (although others have already made this argument for Stalin's vital role), the reality of plots and threats to the government (in relation to purges and the Red Terror), the rebuilding of a strong state, Stalin's consistent opposition to antisemitism, and the ridiculousness of the image of Stalin of as a paranoid dictator ruling by means of his capricious bloodlust. The complex task of unpicking the contradictions and fabrications of the “black legend” is very well done, particularly via close analysis of Trotsky, Khrushchev, Arendt and Robert Conquest's dreadful works. And I found his analysis of the dangers of an ideal, romanticised and universal communism very insightful.

However, I would have liked to see a more sustained analysis of the veneration of Stalin, apart from showing a longer history of such veneration in Russian history

(Kerensky is offered as one of the more extreme examples of self-propelled adulation). Here the veneration of Lenin was more important, since Lenin's heritage was the focus of struggles between Stalin and his opponents. I missed an examination of the social and economic role of such veneration, particularly in relation to economic and extra-economic compulsion. Further, while I would have liked to see more of an exploration of Stalin's faults along with his virtues, this is perhaps not the place for such an analysis. Instead, Losurdo's brave book has another task: to counter a strong and long tradition of the diabolisation of Stalin on the Left. Perhaps a careful analysis of Stalin's real (and not mythical) faults and virtues is a task for the future.

■ *This review originally appeared on 29 August 2014 at the Stalin's Moustache blog site, <http://stalinsmoustache.org/2014/08/29/losurdo-on-stalin-a-review/> and is reproduced here by the author's permission. Manifesto Press is currently approaching Domenico Losurdo for permission to publish an English translation of his book.*

Notes and References

1 Italian: *Stalin: Storia e critica di una leggenda nera* (2008); French: *Staline: Histoire et critique d'une légende noire* (2009); Spanish: *Stalin: historia y crítica de una leyenda negra* (2011); German: *Stalin: Geschichte und Kritik einer schwarzen Legende* (2013).

2 S G Azzarà, *Domenico Losurdo: Classical German philosophy, a critique of liberalism and 'critical Marxism'*, 14 May 2007, at <http://domenicolosurdopresentazing.blogspot.com.au>.

3 D Losurdo, *Controstoria del Liberalismo*, published in English as *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, Verso, London, 2011.

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A Valuable Book on Economics

Review by
Lars Ulrik Thomsen

STAATSMONOPOLISTISCHER Kapitalismus – State Monopoly Capitalism – from the author collective of Binus, Landefeld and Wehr, is divided into four main themes: how did state monopoly capitalism (SMC) evolve?; the history of SMC theory; the current relevance of the SMC analysis; and a strategic discussion on the basis of SMC theory.

As the authors make clear, the theory of SMC has proved to be one of the most viable explanations for the depth and duration of the global economic and financial crisis since 2007. Government interventions on behalf of the monopolies have now reached an entirely new dimension; and the close ties between the state apparatuses and the monopolies, for the purpose of securing the latter's investment interests, comprise the core structure of capitalism today.

Of particular interest is Chapter III, because the authors deal here with developments after the Soviet collapse. There is also a class analysis of the current monopoly bourgeoisie that can provide a better understanding of the changes occurring within the ruling class. The book concludes with a strategic discussion, reviewing historical examples of 'anti-monopoly democracy', as developed by the communist parties from the mid-1960s.

This last topic covers the experience of Chile 1970-73, the April revolution in Portugal in 1974, the alliance between the French Communist and Socialist Parties in the 1980s, and finally the debate in Federal Republic of Germany on alliance and reform policy. Here there is an interesting issue, of promoting debate on how we challenge the current austerity policies and advance social and democratic rights.

To facilitate further debate on SMC theory, some critical comments about the book are relevant.

The question is, whether there is a need for a discussion of the concepts and categories we are using in the economic



theory? – in other words, for a closer cooperation between Marxist economists and philosophers? The major changes that have occurred, since the upheavals in 1989, call for a critical analysis of the economic and societal concepts that we use. Lenin's work *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* can serve as a role model. His preliminary studies, summarised in the *Philosophical Notebooks*, were made in Zürich, Paris and London.¹

An example of the need for clarification is expressed in the beginning of Chapter III of *Staatsmonopolistischer Kapitalismus*, where the authors characterise the events of 1989 as an "epoch break":

"The third major change with the period 1989/90 is a *break of epoch*, and the heaviest defeat until now of the world revolutionary process, entailing the restoration of capitalist ownership, power and distribution conditions in Eastern Europe. It has produced a fundamental change in the development of world capitalism and is characterised by a new polarising competitive struggle, conflicts and wars." (p 56, my italics)

Staatsmonopolistischer Kapitalismus

By GRETCHEN BINUS, BEATE LANDEFELD and ANDREAS WEHR (PapyRossa, Köln, 2015, 132 pp, pbk, €9.90. ISBN 978-3-89438-561-3)

Communists have previously (and partly also today) characterised our era as the transition from capitalism to socialism. If, as the authors determine, there has been an epoch break, then consequently we live in a different era today, but what one? The definition of the epoch is vital for deciding the strategy and tactics of the labour movement.

Here it is worthwhile highlighting the German philosopher Wolf-Dieter Gudopp, who has made a vital contribution to a new understanding of our epoch, *eg* in *Das Maß der Epoche*.² He believes that we have, until now, seen the epoch concept too narrowly, and he does not think there was a break in 1989. In his opinion the former progressive initiatives from the labour movement and other democratic forces have been replaced by a reactionary period.

Staatsmonopolistischer Kapitalismus is however an excellent introduction to the subject, particularly for readers who have not previously worked with Marxist theory in the economic field. Its clear overview and good language make reading the book a worthy experience. Many questions that are usually inaccessible are illustrated here in a convincing way. I can highly recommend the book, and only hope that it will soon be translated into other major languages.

Notes and References

- 1 V I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 38, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1976.
- 2 W-D Gudopp von Behm and R Eckert, *Das Maß der Epoche (The Measure of the Epoch)*, Verein Wissenschaft & Sozialismus, Frankfurt am Main, reprint, 1995.

BOOK REVIEW

Enveloping the Core of Marx's Work in a Degree of Mist

Review by John Ellison

THE LATEST, and one of the larger, biographies of Karl Marx, is by Jonathan Sperber, an American professor-historian, who tells us at the outset that Marx should be understood as an essentially 19th century figure, perhaps more backward-looking than of 21st century relevance. It is Marx's fiercely uncompromising personality, we are told in the book's final paragraph, which arouses special interest today. First published in 2013, and now out in paperback, the book's mainstream critical esteem has been glowing. However, the question bubbles up: does this *'Life'* assume that Marxism is a dead letter in today's world, or even seek to prove it?

The journey through this book produces from time to time another question: is Professor Sperber over-ready to miss the point? Two examples appear in rapid succession when he considers the *Communist Manifesto*:

After re-translating from the German original the quotable sentence, "All that is solid melts into air ...",¹ into his own stodgier, more literal version, he decides that it means the bourgeoisie "would defeat the Prussian conservatives". This, for me, suggests irrationality, more than acuteness, of judgment, for the lines, in context, are addressing the dramatic impact of modern capitalism in general, not the landowners of Prussia.

Immediately afterwards, Sperber quotes another well-known *Manifesto* passage, "National distinctiveness and conflicts between nations disappear more and more with the development of the bourgeoisie ..."², and he then claims that here was one of Marx's least successful predictions, given the later rise of nationalism and the First World War. But in so concluding, he overlooks the second half of Marx's thesis. The first half certainly admitted the development of internationalism within capitalism, noting that:

"In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible ..."³

The second half, unnoticed, remarkably, by Sperber, was that "the supremacy of the proletariat" would cause nation against nation conflicts to "vanish still faster" or, more exactly:

"In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end."⁴

Certainly Marx was hoping and expecting that socialist revolution would before long do away with wars between nations, but Sperber misstates Marx's thesis. If the first of these two examples implies irrationality of judgment, the second implies a failure to digest a straightforward text.

Sperber tells us that he made use of the fullest gathering-up of the work of Marxism's founders, *ie* the mainly-in-German Karl Marx-Friedrich Engels *Gesamtausgabe*, which is even more extensive than the 50-volume *Collected Works* published in English. The professor plainly has serious intentions, and early on he acknowledges Marx's humanism of outlook. He asserts, and surely no-one disagrees, that it makes no sense to view Marx as if he could look a century and a half into the future, as if, indeed, he were living and telling us now about how capitalism is functioning and what should be done about it. But to conclude that all that is left is interesting old-hat history, plus an intriguing revolutionary personality, side-steps reality for a mightily obvious reason.

This is that although capitalism has had a huge and terrible history of change and development since the deaths of Marx and Engels, it continues to be capitalism

(acknowledged in much literature including Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* – see CR74); and, accordingly, while major attempts at establishing socialist societies came to an end a decade before the twentieth century ended, the Marxist critique of, and challenge to, capitalism continues to show remarkable relevance (in this regard, Sperber's last chapter remark that Marxist political parties have ceased to be, is not just false but embarrassingly so).

The reader is conducted slowly and diligently through Marx's life-journey. The account of his family origins and of the social and political Trier background is detailed and illuminating. If the writing itself, occasionally awkward though not dry as dust, lacks the sparkling vitality of Francis Wheen's shorter and 15-years-old biography⁵ (brimful of knockabout irreverence and admiring commentary), or the more clinical, tightly packed exposition in the 2006 version of David McLellan's benchmark life⁶ (and its previous incarnations), what matter?

Unfortunately Sperber's terminology does not always generate clarity. Repeatedly, in particular, he resorts to describing the mature thought of Marx as "Hegelian" when, so far as I can make out, he means only that expressions which Marx used contain reminders or echoes of Hegel's language

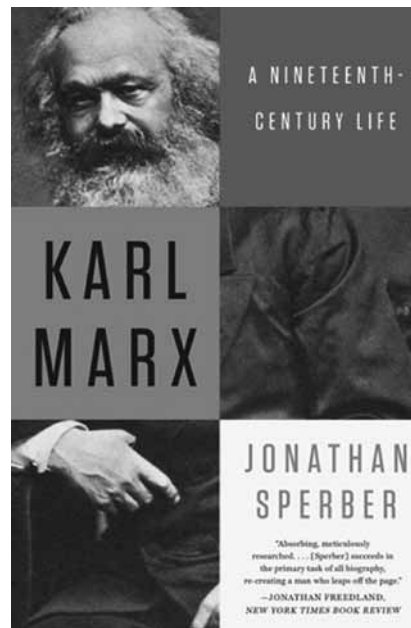
Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life

By JONATHAN SPERBER
(Norton, London, 2013:
hbk, 512 pp, £25.00;
ISBN 978-0-87140-467-1;
pbk 672 pp, £12.99,
ISBN 978-0-87140-737-5)

and of his conservative and abstract philosophical system. Likewise, Sperber is not averse to referring to the later Marx (and especially Engels) as adopting “positivist” thinking (*ie* roughly, faith in the superiority of natural sciences and in human progress), as if this made Marx less ‘Hegelian’ or less ‘Marxist’ and more ‘positivist’, but leaving this reader more than doubtful that Sperber is saying anything sensible.

Unwary readers might also be warned of a recurring tendency of the professor to overreach himself with enlivening little enhancements of the actual narrative evidence he supplies. First, drunkenness is speculatively ascribed to Marx’s father on an admittedly convivial Trier social occasion in 1834; then Marx himself, during his first university year at Bonn is described as engaged in “chiefly extracurricular” activities when the academic record evidence is that he applied himself diligently to his studies. We know that the 17-year-old Marx had a wild year at Bonn – but he also seems to have studied productively. The “chiefly extra-curricular” is therefore Sperber’s guess. These are but small examples of a liking for window-dressing historical material, but there are larger instances.

In some respects Sperber shows discriminating judgment. Thus, considering



the charge of antisemitism – and that Marx was a “self-hating Jew” – he balances the evidence carefully and duly acquits him. On another tack – the question whether Marx’s tossing and goring, via his 1860 pamphlet, of the luckless Herr Vogt (a scientific professor claiming radicalism but later proven to be in the pay of the French emperor) was worth the ink or the pen’s wear and tear – Professor Sperber is kinder than Wheen.⁷

Examples, return, however, of Professor Sperber’s inclination to reach abrupt unconvincing conclusions about aspects of Marx’s work. It is as though he is over-eager to be original. An example is his unqualified assertion that, as *Rheinische Zeitung* editor in 1842, Marx advocated the use of the army to put down a communist workers’ uprising (if one occurred). At that time, it should be said, Marx had not yet acquainted himself with, or become sympathetic to, socialist ideas. But although Sperber quotes amply from the article in question, the key words “practical attempts ... can be answered with cannons” can be alternatively

interpreted as less of a demand for such an armed state response than a neutral acknowledgment of its likely occurrence.

Another imperfectly supported Sperber assertion is that the *Communist Manifesto* borrowed a number of “almost verbatim” passages from the memoirs of an early Marx academic mentor, Eduard Gans. More than the line or two of inexact similarity – which is all the corroboration which Sperber offers

us – was surely needed for this point to be established comfortably.

His consideration, over ten or more pages, of the relationship between Marx and positivist philosophy is unsatisfying and even awash with confusion and red herrings. There is too much Sperber here and not enough Marx. Sperber does not say, at the outset, to whose “positivism” he is referring, suggesting it encouraged scientific approaches to all issues; and when he gets round, at a late stage, to introducing its leading thinker, Auguste Comte (1798-1857), his explanation of Comte’s philosophical contribution is nominal. The first mention of Comte by Marx was, I understand, in 1866,⁸ and he was soon dismissive, finding this “positivism” inseparable from religion. Marx’s acid comment to Engels in 1869, that positivist philosophy “may be equated with ignorance of anything positive”, is not cited by Sperber.

Instead, he contrasts Marx’s language in the *Communist Manifesto* (dialectics prominent) with that in the 1864 *Address to the International Working Men’s*

Association (scientific details prominent), as if Marx had dropped dialectics in favour of positivism. “The transition from Hegelian to positivist forms of representation leaps off the page”, Sperber declares. Leaving aside the fact that Marx was by 1844 an ex-Hegelian (keeping, as Wheen put it, the dialectical framework, but discarding the mystical mumbo-jumbo¹⁰), Sperber is not comparing like with like. The *Manifesto* called for revolution; the *Address* did not. In any event, Sperber then placidly admits that he is concerned here with style more than substance by agreeing that Marx “held fast to his philosophical basics, while articulating them in a form more acceptable to a positivist era.”

In this regard David McLellan’s biography (which Sperber refers to benignly as “excellent”) notes Marx’s usage of biological metaphors to express his ideas, his view that his method in the study of economic formations was more akin to biology than to physics or chemistry, and points to his increased interest in the natural sciences during the last decade of his life.¹¹ But undoubtedly Marx kept aloof from Comte’s philosophical system.

Again, in a throwaway remark, Sperber refers to the closing down in 1872 of the International Working Men’s Association by transfer of its headquarters to New York, as the “dissolving” of the International by Marx. Marx was instrumental, indeed, in securing this transfer, which much reduced the International’s role, but the decision was that of the delegates by vote, and the organisation was already in a state of decay and disarray through resignations and discord. Marx was not the International’s ruler.

I have identified a few



BOOK REVIEW

irritants in this biography, and they are not alone. Though generally Sperber is benevolent towards Marx himself, he is not above ascribing to him the pettier sort of motives for conflict with other radicals. Thus Marx's blistering attack on the "True Socialist" Karl Grün was partly for reasons of "personal rivalry", although Grün was not any sort of a match in terms of intellect or character to make such a motive particularly credible. Again, the professor suggests that Marx was capable of applying class prejudice and regarding his 'social inferiors' as stupid. While it can be acknowledged that Marx, impatient of false assumptions, false conclusions and foolishness generally, railed intemperately against individual owners of these sins, Sperber is unable to make good his charge. It is not only out of kilter with Marx's fierce sense of solidarity with the working class, which he believed to have the historic role of overthrowing capitalism, but also with Marx's recorded behaviour towards working class leaders. His quarrel with the communist Wilhelm Weitling in 1846, even in Sperber's own account, reveals no such class superiority or contempt. Nor does his supportive behaviour much later towards Johann Eccarius, according to the account given by Wheen.¹²

A further and major shortcoming of Sperber's treatise, in my view, is that it draws out with inadequate emphasis the essentials of Marx's insights. This may be in part due to the wish to load the book with material and comment about every aspect of Marx's life and works. For example, Marx's diatribe against Lord Palmerston (Palmerston equals Tsarist agent) – in hindsight misjudged – attracts at least nine pages of coverage, not

much less than that given to the International Working Men's Association (which implausibly he describes as not having "an ... 'internationalist' ... orientation"). McLellan, by the way, allocates far more space to Marx's work for the International, and rightly so.

At Marx's graveside in March 1883, Engels set out the key achievements: the discovery of the law of development of human history (that the production by human beings of the means of living, and the degree of economic development achieved at different historical stages, have formed foundations upon which social institutions are built); the discovery of the special law of motion of capitalist production and the importance in this connection of surplus value; and the development of the argument for the necessity of a socialist society in place of capitalism with a view to a future communist society. In his speech Engels took as read Marx's contribution to philosophy, namely his development of the materialist outlook. He did not specifically incorporate Marx's conviction (and his own) that conflict between social classes had a crucial role in historical development.¹³

While, as E P Thompson and others have suggested, Marx (and still more, Engels) were sometimes unduly inclined to give the grand title of 'laws' to weighty historical materialist hypotheses, and to equate Marxism with natural science, and while the role of class conflict cries out for inclusion among the central features of Marxism, Engels' obituary tribute is otherwise a fair summary. A more complete encapsulation can be found in his 1888 preface to the English edition of the *Manifesto*. Sperber has little interest in sharing this statement of Marx's

legacy with his readers, while identifying divergence between the respective outlooks of Marx and Engels (Engels more "positivist") not recognised by either.¹⁴

A certain well-known quotation could be adjusted to read that, while hitherto many writers about Marx have misinterpreted the essence of what he wrote, the point is that they cannot change it. Sperber does not attempt, on the whole, to rewrite this essence. But instead of bringing to prominence, as part of the Marx story, the concepts at the heart of Marxism, he passes too much over their organic interrelationship, and their integrated persuasiveness. A reader unfamiliar with Marxism could travel to the end of the book without acquiring a sharply defined collection of Marxism's landmark principles.

Marx's association, in his later twenties, of the levels of economic development (productive forces) with social development was made in *The German Ideology* in spring 1846. He was neatly explicit about this in his letter to the Russian journalist Pavel Annenkov in December that year,¹⁵ and he revisited the subject again the following summer in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, his first comprehensive statement on economics. The last-named work tossed out a pithy revelatory sentence: "The windmill gives you the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist."¹⁶ Professor Sperber, to his credit, adequately addresses the relevant passages in *The German Ideology* over a page or two, while however not troubling to flag up either the letter to Annenkov or the later return to the topic.

The heartland of Marx's evolving outlook was again on view and in primary colours in early 1848, when the *Manifesto*

of the Communist Party appeared. Written to provide a platform for revolutionary agitation, it is not short of historical backcloth. The *Manifesto* carries a brief history of how capitalism had come about and why its replacement by socialism was a necessity. In several places the process of the destruction of feudalism by capitalism is addressed, and the observable deficiencies of capitalism are presented in vivid colours, eg:

"Modern industry has established the world-market The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere

[T]he commercial crises ... put on ... trial, each time more threateningly, the existence of the entire bourgeois society."¹⁷

Sperber's dozen pages on the *Manifesto* skirt round most of this. He states, with notable confidence, that "the imminence" of a communist revolution was its main theme. In fact, as a glance at the *Manifesto* confirms, the main theme was the necessity of such a revolution, underpinned by a call to the world's workers to achieve it. I have, early on in this review, identified a couple of curious Sperber interactions with the *Manifesto*. It can be added that Sperber refrains from quoting Marx's (above heavily abbreviated) characterisation of the self-destructive expansionism of capitalism, donating only a sentence or two of his own about this. He neglects the *Manifesto's* explanation of how capitalism

replaced feudalism, and its luminous advertisement of the associated connection between economic and social development.

Later, in 1859, came Marx's well-known consolidating summary of the "guiding thread" of economic development throughout human history in his *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*. This explained that the arrangements for the deployment of the productive forces "constituted the real basis of society" on which arose "a legal and political superstructure", and that at a certain stage the productive forces would develop beyond the established social arrangements, leading to the expiry of that social order.¹⁸ Francis Wheen, keen to draw out Marx's central messages, quoted from this, and summarised it effectively.¹⁹ Professor Sperber, during his exploration of Marx's relationship with positivism, on this occasion to his credit delivers almost a page of Marx's own words on the "guiding thread".

We reach Marx's further exploration of the functioning of capitalism and its flaws and failures. Sperber by no means neglects how Marx, in the long unpublished 1857-8 *Grundrisse* drafts of *Capital*, adopted the theory of earlier economists – notably Ricardo – that workers sold their labour to capitalists, and reached beyond it. In fact it was their ability to labour, their labour power, that they sold, not their labour, and capitalists paid them for only part of their labour, retaining the rest as "surplus value". Sperber explains this, connecting it briefly with Marx's broader historical and economic conceptions, which he insists on calling "Hegelian"; but with amateurish inaccuracy he

calls surplus value "the profit of the capitalists" when profit actually forms only part of it.²⁰

Between the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* came Marx's 1865 public lecture, *Value, Price and Profit*, carrying the deftly expressed kernel of this analysis. This, Professor Sperber just waves at, as a "popular exposition" of economic ideas which Marx was to develop in *Capital*; while later he enigmatically asserts that Marx's analysis of the relationship between value and price raised (unspecified) "questions" about his "entire vision of the future of capitalism".

Once engaged with *Capital* Sperber continues with the explanation as to how capitalism functioned, leading to the central contradiction at its heart (that capital itself is its own long-term enemy). In ponderous fashion he delves into the question of the rate of profit and its tendency to fall. He worries at, as much as investigates, the latter, deciding unconvincingly that most of Marx's final views on the topic of the falling rate of profit are contained in Volume 1 of *Capital*, though

not "explicitly", rather than, as mainstream commentators would say, in Volume 3.²¹ Sperber asserts that "there was no proof" of this tendency of the rate of profit to fall, creating 'a noticeable gap in Marx's analysis of the future of a capitalist economy."

It was nevertheless an expectation based on a persuasive hypothesis, which in present times has not lost its potency, given plentiful evidence of a declining profit rate during recent decades.²² To understand 20th and 21st century capitalism better, Sperber could do worse than read Terry Eagleton's *Why Marx Was Right*.²³

The "noticeable gap" at the centre of Professor Sperber's own analysis is that, although his declared mission is to put Marx back in the box of the 19th century, real-life present-day Marxism declines to be confined there. Crises in capitalism circle the globe, and the rate of profit still has a tendency to fall, however much this tendency is mitigated by other factors. As Francis Wheen wrote, in relation to whether or not Marx "was talking poppycock":

"The boom-bust cycles of Western economies in the twentieth century, like the globe-girdling dominance of Bill Gates's Microsoft, suggest otherwise."²⁴

It may be said that Sperber abstains from any frontal attack on Marxism. It is shrugged off, not assaulted. The only reinforcement of this position that Sperber offers is his enveloping the core of Marx's work in a degree of mist, while sniping at outpost positions he considers weak but which, when his skewed interpretation of the historical record is examined, appear stronger.

So, despite the presence in this biography of material of interest to the keener students of its subject, readers already aware of the catastrophe that present-day capitalism offers us may reasonably head for Wheen, especially for the life, and then McLellan, to understand more about the work. Sperber's *Life* should be handled with both bravery and caution.

Notes and References

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2 Sperber references K Marx and F Engels, *Werke*, Vol 4, p 479, which is the German-language collection published by the Socialist Unity Party in the German Democratic Republic (1977). The translation is therefore his own, and differs significantly from that in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)*, Vol 6, p 503, viz "National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie" [The German original text is "Die nationalen Absonderungen und Gegensätze verschwinden mehr und mehr schon mit der Entwicklung der Bourgeoisie ...", which is arguably more accurately (if prosaically) translated as "National divisions and oppositions are already fading away

more and more with the development of the bourgeoisie ..."] –Ed.]

3 Marx and Engels in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, *op cit*, pp 248-9.

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BOOK REVIEW

Plugging an Important Gap for Studies of Gramsci

Review by Martin Levy

“A COLLECTION OF LETTERS”, says Derek Boothman in his Introduction to this book, “is also essentially a biography – here of a man recognised as one of the twentieth century’s leading thinkers.” And, while it is now over 40 years since English translations of many of Gramsci’s *prison* letters were published,^{1,2} and 20 years since the definitive set of them appeared,³ a corresponding collection of his earlier letters has until now been noticeably absent.

This present publication therefore plugs an important gap. Not only does it help us to understand the developing personality of Gramsci the man, and the depths of his personal relationships – thus affording essential context to the prison letters, many of which relate to personal matters; but it also provides a background political commentary and insight to the development of the Italian Communist Party during the first 6 years of its existence, from its formation at Livorno in 1921, through the at-times difficult relationship with the International up to and including the development of a new leadership which helped the Party to grow and consolidate itself even as Mussolini’s fascism was on the ascendancy. It is an invaluable complement to the *Selection from the Political Writings, 1921-1926*⁴, which includes just a few of the letters published in the present volume.

As an adjunct professor at the University of Bologna, and editor and translator of the 1995 *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*⁵, Derek Boothman is well placed to undertake the task of bringing such a collection before the English-speaking world. It is a labour which has taken several years, as many different archive sources have had to be accessed; and indeed, in that process, new unknown letters

and documents emerged, delaying publication. Ultimately, the present book includes about two-thirds of the letters currently known from the period, precedence being given to newly-found letters and to avoiding duplication.

Boothman identifies 7 distinct periods, assigning a chapter to each: school and home in Sardinia; university student in Turin; revolutionary journalist, 1916-21; the time as Italian Communist Party (PCI) representative to the Comintern in Moscow, 1922-3; the Vienna months, December 1923 – April 1924, when Gramsci opened a long-planned office that was intended to play the role as the PCI’s Foreign Bureau; then the time in Rome up to his arrest in November 1926. Boothman divides the last into two chapters, based on the natural correspondence break from September 1925 until July 1926, when Gramsci’s Soviet wife Jul’ka and their young son Delio stayed with him in Italy.

Despite the short time Gramsci spent in Vienna, that chapter is by far the longest in the book, reflecting not only the frequency of his correspondence with Jul’ka but, more importantly, the pains he was taking to build a new leadership group in the PCI, in order to overcome then general secretary Amadeo Bordiga’s left-sectarianism and to bring the PCI into line with the overall strategy of the International, carrying forward the process of fusion with the left of the Socialist Party and turning the PCI’s activity towards mass organising.

We find that, as an essential part of this endeavour, Gramsci was striving to establish a new series of *L’Ordine Nuovo* (the name of the weekly that he co-founded in Turin) as a broad left review, alongside the recently-established Party paper *L’Unità*, plus “a quarterly journal capable of encouraging and organising

the front-line elements of the party around a given activity” (pp 204, 210-213), as well as seeking to initiate the development of Party political education programmes and the publication of “a first series of fifty popular pamphlets ... that can be used for propaganda and agitation amongst the broad masses” (pp 213-216, 231-234).

As *CR* editor I can find much to empathise with here. However, there are also important strategic and political insights: the imperative of organising in order to win over key industrial sectors – the Milanese proletariat, the seafarers and rail workers (p 230); Gramsci’s emphasis on “propaganda around the watchword of a worker-peasant government, which must spring from the Italian situation in its entirety and must no longer be some theoretical formula”; and the need to “struggle against the working class aristocracy, that is against reformism, for the alliance of the poorest strata of the Northern working class with the peasant masses of the South and the islands” (p 241). This last point was later developed in his article *Some Aspects of the Southern Question*⁶.

In April 1924 Gramsci was elected to parliament as one of two deputies for the *Unitaria proletaria* list for the Veneto, and so could return to Italy under parliamentary immunity from arrest. These were stormy days, with fascism on the back foot following the kidnapping and assassination of the Unitary Socialist Party secretary, Giacomo Matteotti, who had denounced fascist ballot-rigging and electoral fraud. PCI membership soared to 30,000, despite the Party being effectively illegal; and in August Gramsci became general secretary, although for security reasons that was not minuted or made public. Gramsci’s many letters to Jul’ka and others in this period testify

A Great and Terrible World: The Pre-Prison Letters, 1908-1926

By ANTONIO GRAMSCI

Edited and Translated by DEREK BOOTHMAN

(Lawrence & Wishart, London, 2014, pbk, £25.00; ISBN 978-1-907103-96-4)

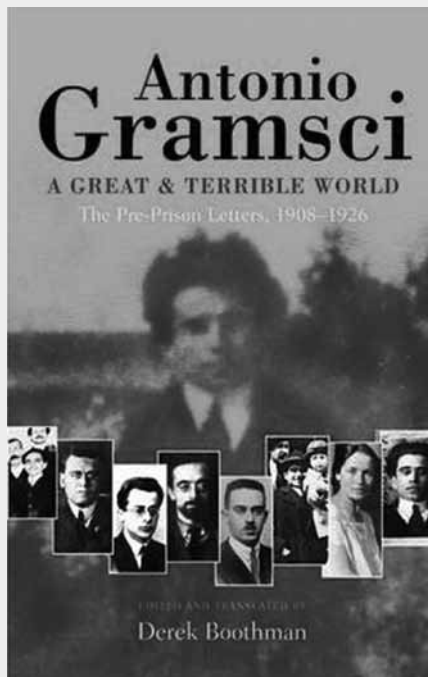
to the uplift in Party activity and the enormous amount of work that he himself was undertaking. Until 1925 he was, it is true, over-optimistic about the prospects for the overthrow of fascism in the short-term (p 336), although he was also cautious about the potential outcome:

“Is it possible to think that we can go from fascism to the dictatorship of the proletariat? What immediate phases are possible or probable?” (p 256; March 1924)

“We must not however nurse any illusions: 1 – because the Party is still working badly and moving sluggishly; 2 – because the situation is still clearly dominated by the fascists, ... that is to say by the armed bourgeois forces in their entirety ... ; 3 – because the masses are terribly disorganised and think the opposition groups will be able to eliminate fascism without a bloody struggle. They want peace, they want calm, and any prospect of a new period of great struggle frightens them.” (p 326; September 1924)

Here, perhaps, is the germ of the idea, later expressed in the *Prison Notebooks*, of a *war of position*, of patient building when the conditions are not ripe for the revolutionary assault, the *war of manoeuvre*.

What is certainly clear from the letters, from the Moscow period onwards, is Gramsci’s commitment to the Leninist concept of the Party and to adherence to the collectively decided line of the Communist International. Boothman does suggest one issue on which Gramsci showed “independence of judgement” – the correspondence



with Togliatti over the split in the Soviet Communist Party between the Central Committee majority and the ‘joint opposition’ (pp 369-376, 378-381, 383-387). However, there is no suggestion that the PCI would have broken ranks over this. “Independence of judgement” can arise when those making the judgement have different degrees of access to essential information. My view is that Togliatti, who is in Moscow, had a better understanding of the reality on this occasion.

Of course this book is also a biography of Gramsci’s personal life, and we learn first about his relations with his family in Sardinia, including repeated requests for money to pay fees, to buy books and simply to survive. It is clear that, from an early age, his health was not good. Then in Moscow he had a severe breakdown, which enforced a sanatorium stay of 6 months (p 244). Later on he writes to Jul’ka, saying “I’ve been sleeping little, ... my brain is tired and my eyes are burning” (p 251), “I’m going through drab and depressed days” (p 314), “I’m again suffering insomnia and weakness; thinking tires me and work is reducing my nerves to shreds” (p 315).

The relationship with Jul’ka comes out increasingly in the later part of the collection. Anyone who has conducted such a deep personal relationship at a distance would identify with the emotions in these letters. The book’s subtitle “a great and terrible world”

is used several times by Gramsci, and this favourite quotation from Kipling’s *Kim* had clearly become a catchword between him and Jul’ka. They had become a couple not long before Gramsci was sent to Vienna, but he did not know that Jul’ka was pregnant until shortly before Delio’s birth in August 1924. Theirs was a political as well as a personal bond, and Jul’ka would have understood the need for Gramsci to carry out his assigned activities; but his love, anxieties, hopes for the future and desperation at the continued separation are clearly expressed. Later, when Jul’ka and Delio returned to Moscow in August 1926 for her second confinement, Gramsci writes first of feeling “rather at a loss” at the separation, and then of not being able “to manage to tell you all my feelings” at the news of Giuliano’s birth.

In an extensive Introduction, Derek Boothman provides biographical, historical and political background to the letters, essential in order to understand the context. The many end-notes for the Introduction and for the individual chapters, plus the select bibliography and the notes on the main characters and organisations, indicate the care and scholarship undertaken in preparing this collection. Places where the translated text differs from previous versions, or from previous Italian collections, are clearly explained and justified. The book is thoroughly recommended; the only real problem with it is the price.

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- 3 A Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, Vols 1 and 2, F Rosengarten, ed, R Rosenthal, trans, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994.
- 4 A Gramsci, *Selection from the Political Writings, 1921-1926 (SPW)*, Q Hoare, trans and ed, Lawrence & Wishart, 1978.
- 5 A Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, D Boothman, trans and ed, Lawrence & Wishart, 1995.
- 6 A Gramsci, *The Modern Prince & other writings*, L Marks, trans, International Publishers, New York, 1957, pp 28-51; *SPW*, *op cit*, pp 441-462.
- 7 Previously published in Gramsci, *SPW*, *op cit*, pp 426-440.



SOURCEBOOK

A regular literary selection

Selected by Mike Quille

Good Art is like a Lorry: It Transports

IN THE LAST COLUMN I covered the Teesside International Poetry Festival. One of the people who was due to attend the festival was John Berger, the Marxist art critic, essayist, novelist, artist and poet. He could not come in the end, due to severe arthritis (he is 88 years old), but he appeared via Skype at one of the sessions, and recited some poems from his recent collection.

Collected Poems reflects Berger's longstanding concerns with art and politics, love and war, history and memory, and the life of the peasantry around him (he lives in the Haute Savoie, in the French Alps). They demonstrate an enduring commitment to the extraordinary lives of ordinary people.

You can tell from the poems that the writer is a fine draughtsman and artist. Each one of them is like a perfectly

framed image, a painted still life, sensual, honest and plain. They are sketches of hard lives, caught between the provisional nature of language and the permanence of things.

Here are five of the poems.

16.45h The Firing Squad

The dog carried the day in her
mouth
over the fields of the small
hours
towards a hiding place
which before had been safe.

Nobody was woken before
dawn.

At noon
the dog sprawling in the shade

placed the pup between her
four paws
and waited in vain
for it to suck.

A line of prisoners
hands knotted
fall forward
into the grave they have dug.

Belly to the earth
the dog carries the day
which has never stirred
back to its dark.

Under the stars the bereaved
imagine they hear
a dog howling too
on the edge of the world.

This piteous day was born
stone-deaf and blind.

“The poverty of our century is unlike that of any other. It is not, as poverty was before, the result of natural scarcity, but of a set of priorities imposed upon the rest of the world by the rich. Consequently, the modern poor are not pitied ... but written off as trash. The twentieth-century consumer economy has produced the first culture for which as beggar is a reminder of nothing.”

Keeping a Rendezvous (1992)





John Berger

“The issue is not between innocence and knowledge (or between the natural and the cultural) but between a total approach to art which attempts to relate it to every aspect of experience and the esoteric approach of a few specialised experts who are the clerks of the nostalgia of a ruling class in decline. (In decline, not before the proletariat, but before the new power of the corporation and the state.)”

Ways of Seeing (1972)

Ladle

Pewter pock-marked
moon of the ladle
rising above the mountain
going down into the saucepan
serving generations
steaming
dredging what has grown from
seed
in the garden
thickened with potato
outliving us all
on the wooden sky
of the kitchen wall

Serving mother
of the steaming pewter breast
veined by the salts
fed to her children
hungry as boars
with the evening earth
engrained around their nails
and bread the brother
serving mother

Ladle
pour the sky steaming
with the carrot sun
the stars of salt
and the grease of the pig earth
pour the sky steaming
ladle
pour soup for our days
pour sleep for our night
pour years for my children

That last poem is surely comparable to Neruda’s brilliantly earthy, lyrical odes to everyday objects (see *Soul Food* in CR71).

ART AND POLITICS

As well as being a major poet, John Berger is a cultural critic who has challenged and changed the way we see the world, in countless essays and in books such as *Ways of Seeing*, *Permanent Red*, *Pig Earth*, and the novel *G*.
During the Skype session, he



Napalm

Mother let me cry
not letterpress
nor telex
nor stainless speech
bulletins
announce disaster
with impunity –
but the pages of the wound.

Mother let me speak
not adjectives
to colour
their maps of wretchedness
nor nouns to classify
the families of pain –
but the verb of suffering.

My mother tongue taps
the sentence
on the prison wall
Mother let me write
the voices
howling in the falls.

History

The pulse of the dead
as interminably
constant as the silence
which pockets the thrush.

The eyes of the dead
inscribed on our palms
as we walk on this earth
which pockets the thrush.

Seven Levels of Despair

To search each morning
to find the scraps
with which to survive another
day.

The knowledge on waking
that in this legal wilderness
no rights exist.

The experience over the
years
of nothing getting better
only worse.
The humiliation of being
able
to change almost nothing,
and of seizing upon the
almost
which then leads to another
impasse.

The listening to a thousand
promises
which pass inexorably
beside you and yours.

The example of those who
resist
being bombarded to dust.

The weight of your own
killed
a weight which closes
innocence for ever
because they are
so many.

“I now believe there is an absolute incompatibility between art and private property, or art and state property, unless the state is a plebeian democracy. Property must be destroyed before imagination can be developed any further.”
Preface to Permanent Red
 (1979 edition)

answered some questions from us about art and politics. I followed this up with a telephone interview with him, and exchanged some texts, and below I set out the questions he was asked, and the answers that he gave.

Q. What constitutes good art?

A. Good art is like a lorry: it transports.

Q. Are poets, as Shelley famously suggested, the unacknowledged legislators of the world?

A. Poets are not legislators themselves, but they can be great agents of change. They evoke the need for a new politics by being able to envision the world, to summon up the past and future, to make them present, thus making it clearer how things could be different.

Q. Auden said that poetry changed nothing, and Brecht said that art is a hammer with which to change reality. Can poetry make useful political interventions, and change reality?

A. Well you have to remember that reality is not just some outside, fixed given, it includes our experience of what's out there. With that in mind, it seems to me that poetry can indeed change people, because we all know how a good poem alters, no matter how slightly, our perceptions of the world around us. Those perceptions lead to us making hundreds of different choices, including

political choices. So its effect is continuous, and multiple.

It can also encourage disobedience, and demonstrate that language is not necessarily the meaningless crap by which we are surrounded!

Q. You have produced many kinds of writing, including art criticism, novels, essays, and poems. Which discipline do you prefer the most?

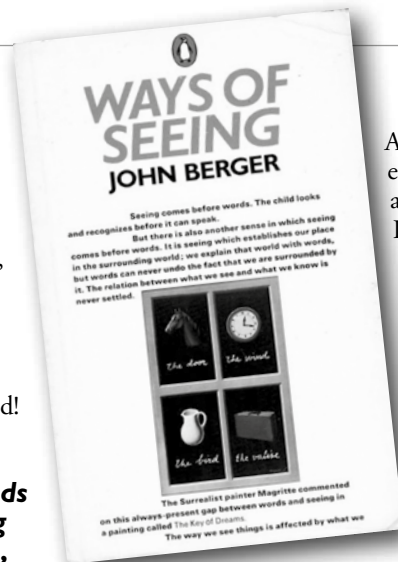
A. Nearly all my work has involved collaborations with other people. For example, *Ways of Seeing*, for which most people know me best, was a collaboration with several others, and this tends to get forgotten.

So I would say that I don't have a preferred genre as such, but I do have a preferred mode of creativity, and that is collaboration. For me, collaboration is a kind of solidarity, in fact it creates solidarity, and that is for me a very important principle of working.

Q. You spoke of the ability of poetry to envision the world. How should teachers and academics approach poetry, what should they do with it, and how should it be taught?

A. Students and people generally should be encouraged to surround themselves with poetry, with the sounds and forms and silences that are in poems.

Q. What impact do you think the internet has had on the arts and society generally?



A. The internet is a fast, effective way of sharing a lot of information. It thus helps expose and clarify the present structures of power in the world. It makes it clearer how globalised capitalism works, how the world is run by decisions taken by giant transnational corporations, by tiny elites of capitalists.

I think many young people see this clearly, partly because of the ease with which they handle new technology, but also because they are one of the main victims of unemployment, low pay and insecure employment.

Politicians have lost power, or perhaps it has become clearer how little power they ever really had. But they won't admit it, and this leads to great folly and doublespeak in the use of language, which alienates people, it makes us feel lost and desperate. But we can resist it when we realise where power comes from; and as I say, the internet and new technology generally can help clarify where real power lies.

Q. What would your parting message be to us?

A. We live in a dark age. Art has existed for at least 30,000 years. Another age of hope will come.

Work for it!

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Smokestack for permission to reprint the poems by John Berger, which are taken from *Collected Poems*, Smokestack Books, 2014.

Junk food: an irregular cartoon strip

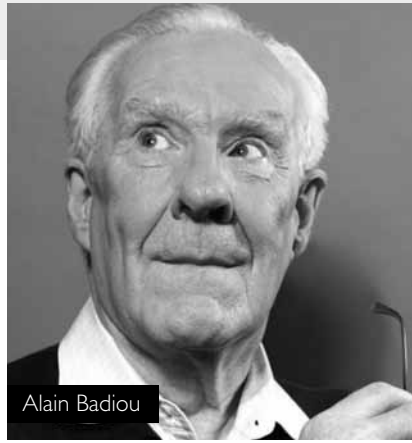


Letter to the Editor

From Paul Simon

I RATHER admire some of Alain Badiou's output, including *In Praise of Love* and *Philosophy for Militants*, if nothing else for its readability and passion. But his interview in *CR75* pretty much exposes his philosophical and tactical eclecticism and, therefore, the limitations of his writings as guides for communist thought and action.

Firstly, whilst he correctly asserts the need for us to reclaim the term 'communism' from our enemies, he nonetheless airily condemns the "the violent and state-heavy times of Lenin and Stalin"! It is precisely this kind of unanalytical and non-dialectical claim that has been so effectively used by both the capitalist establishment and various Trotskyist sects to distort the political, economic and social context in which the nascent Soviet Union found itself in the years from 1917. As the excellent series of articles by Yuri Emelianov in previous issues of *CR* demonstrated, Marxist tools



of analysis, when properly applied, provide a clearer picture of a complex situation – and its applicability or non-applicability to present situations – than can be confined by mere propagandist clichés. Anyone who fails to consider the achievements and failures of earlier attempts at real existing socialism hardly deserves to call themselves a communist!

Secondly, Badiou, whilst again correctly identifying some of the potential revolutionary forces present in the globalised capitalist system, asserts that the only relationship between these spontaneous elements

and the "old political parties attached to the history of communism" is one of the latter in a subsidiary role playing catch-up. Badiou seems to discount the possibility of the two forces in different contexts drawing strength from each others' respective imperatives and organisational and theoretical insights, with the "old political parties" offering the rigour and cohesion of democratic centralism needed to withstand the inevitable onslaughts of the capitalist class.

For example, it is unlikely that Nepal would have been able to overthrow its monarchical and centralised power structures due to the 2003 street protests in Kathmandu alone. It needed the discipline and experience of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) to raise the overall political consciousness of the people so as to bring the government and the army to its knees. As an admirer of Maoism, Badiou should know this.

Badiou's romanticism is a tonic in print, but frankly offers less satisfaction in the real world.

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