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Sweezy and Baran's *Monopoly Capital* after 50 Years:
A critical appraisal by Zoltan Zigedy

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editorial Martin Levy

15 January 2017

Martin Levy

WRITING JUST a few days before Donald Trump's inauguration as US president, I recall the following quotation from Antonio Gramsci:

> "If the ruling class has lost its consensus, that is, if it no longer 'leads' but only 'rules' – it possesses sheer coercive power – this actually means that the great masses have become detached from traditional ideologies, they no longer believe what they previously used to believe, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass."[1]

Of course, Gramsci was referring to the rise of fascism, then at its height in Italy; but the US political situation does reflect the facts that "the ruling class has lost its consensus", and the great masses "no longer believe what they previously used to believe"; while Trump is very much a "morbid phenomenon", as was Mussolini in Italy.

We just need to look at Trump's friends – the most right-wing, reactionary, racist government in US history, including such figures as Steve Bannon from 'alt-right' Breitbart News as chief strategist and senior counsellor – to understand that the US working class, and the peoples of the world, are going to be in for a rough time. Already it seems that

> "the Trumpublicans are intent on manipulating the shock of Donald Trump's victory to roll back much of the New Deal and Great Society … and intimidate opponents, professional civil servants, and the press, in a rapid Blitzkrieg"[2],

a classic case of what Naomi Klein called "The Shock Doctrine"[3]. And, while Trump recognises for the time being that US policy in Syria has failed, and therefore that there needs to be an accommodation with Russia, his pronouncements on nuclear weapons, and his hostile attitude towards Iran and China, threaten a dangerous rise in international tension.

Trump may be a big businessman and a billionaire, but he's also a maverick and a mountebank, quite clearly in the game for himself, riding a wave of populism. This is what alarms US finance capital and the military-industrial complex, which had hoped for the same as before, through the safe hands of Clinton, with the calm assertion of US military might as the No 1 power in the world. That explains the unprecedented assault on Trump by the US intelligence community and the outgoing administration in the days and weeks before the inauguration. They want either to limit his freedom of action or to find ways of levering him out before things go too badly for their interests.[4]

So the US ruling class has "lost its consensus", "the old is dying, and the new cannot yet be born". In Britain, we see something similar, expressed in UKIP's rise, finance capital's defeat in the EU referendum – and its attempts since then to reclaim lost ground – and in the lack of any clear strategy in Theresa May's government for achieving Brexit while defending finance capital's interests. It's a situation which is fraught with danger, but also one with opportunity if the left grasps it, and understands the nature of class society.

Gramsci went on to point out that the "interregnum" would not absolutely be resolved in favour of restoration of the old, and that "physical dejection will lead, in the long run, to widespread scepticism", from which "one may conclude that highly favourable conditions are being created for an unprecedented expansion of historical materialism"[1], ie Marxism. With hindsight, that might seem overoptimistic, in that it took 14 more years, and a world war, for the defeat of Italian fascism and for the Italian Communist Party (PCI) to emerge as a powerful force. But what enabled the PCI to achieve that was its connection with the masses, its organisation and discipline, and its clarity in Marxist theory as applied to its own situation.

In Russia, one hundred years ago this year, events had already followed the scenario that Gramsci depicted – the old Tsarist regime had gone; the government of capitalists and landowners could only rule by "coercive power"; and "morbid phenomena" were occurring, such as Kornilov's attempted coup. All of this created highly favourable conditions for the "unprecedented expansion" of Marxism and the victory of the Russian workers, soldiers and peasants in Red October. Later issues of *CR* in 2017 will examine the processes leading up to that victory, and celebrate its impact and achievements. For now, let us just point out that the Revolution was led by a party, the Bolsheviks, which was immersed in the masses, disciplined and – under Lenin's leadership – had a clear knowledge of Marxist theory applied to local conditions.

CR's role is to help develop the necessary theoretical clarity in Britain. Following our series on state monopoly capitalism, we now publish Zoltan Zigedy's extensive critique of Sweezy and Baran's *Monopoly Capital*. In response to Andrew Murrary's *CR*81 article on the centenary of Lenin's *Imperialism*, we have a fraternal rejoinder from Lars Ulrik Thomsen. In our front-cover feature, Kevin Donnelly argues that Franz Fanon can be read usefully towards understanding both oppression and national culture. Paul Levy continues the philosophical series on *Space, Time – and Dialectics*, with reflections on mathematics and its role. Nick Wright provides insight into the reality of the war in Syria. Finally, *Soul Food* extracts extensively from the poetry collection *New Boots and Pantisocracies*.

Notes and References

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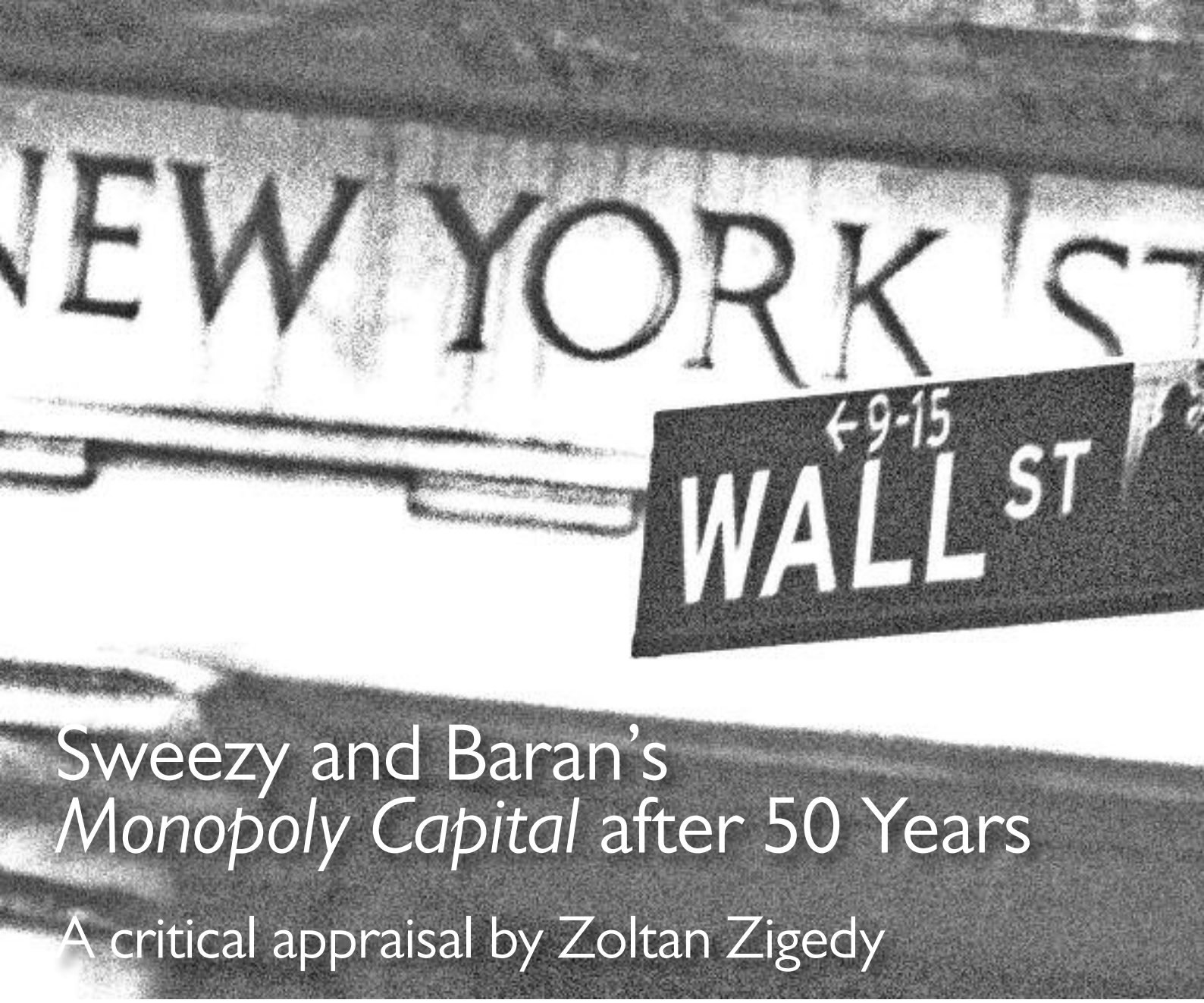

Sweezy and Baran's *Monopoly Capital* after 50 Years

A critical appraisal by Zoltan Zigedy

Fifty years ago, Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy published *Monopoly Capital*. In very many ways, it was a new and fresh perspective in Marxist political economy. The essay was influential at the time and remains influential today. There is every reason to celebrate its publication as a work of brilliance and scholarship. And there is also every reason to view *Monopoly Capital* as a product of its time. By 1966, the US was recovering somewhat from its latest and most virulent infection of anti-communism and anti-left repression. The decade after Stalin's death, the rise of a new Soviet leadership, and the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence also brought a modest lessening of Cold War tensions. At the same time, the US social-democratic programme – originating with Roosevelt's New Deal – reached its zenith with Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society' and 'War on Poverty'.

"The left infatuation with Keynes and so-called 'under-consumption' theories was encouraged by the more than two decades of relatively persistent growth and stability in the US and Europe that followed the Second World War."

The final two components – Medicare and Medicaid – were put in place in 1965. Few knew then that the ensuing decades would only produce modest tinkering, sharp attacks, and continual erosion of the liberal reforms.

The axiom of early Cold War liberalism that guns and butter were possible, and that, in the opinion of some, guns were *necessary* for securing butter, was about to be shattered by a costly, rapidly escalating Asian conflict. No future liberal US political regime would embrace that illusion again. Henceforth, guns (military power and its exercise) would always take precedence over and postpone butter (social reforms).

By the mid-1960s, the struggle against segregation was spreading beyond Southern borders and threatening racist institutions in the rest of the US. Anti-war activity, centred around the universities, took a dramatic leap forward as well. Both developments were driven by militant and growing mass movements, a fact not lost on an increasingly obdurate ruling class.

New Thinking

Baran and Sweezy (Paul Baran died in 1964, two years before *Monopoly Capital* was published) found themselves thinking deeply about contemporary capitalism at a unique moment. Many factors came together fortuitously to stimulate new, unconventional, and provocative ideas about political economy, capitalism and socialism.

The post-Stalin period encouraged a review and critical discussion of positions formerly viewed as canonical to Marxist political economy. Nothing demonstrates this change more so than the Soviet publication of Eugen Varga's *Politico-Economic Problems of Capitalism* in 1963 (English translation available in 1968). Varga had long been the Communist International's leading economist and arguably the most influential Soviet economist until that time. Varga's book was highly critical of his own previous views and staked out controversial positions on economic laws, the state and monopoly.

In 1965, the Soviet Union implemented the so-called 'Liberman reforms', a departure from the prior socialist directive economic planning. The Liberman principles sought to improve economic efficiency, growth and incentives through introducing enterprise autonomy, flexibility in labour policy, and new technical concepts of sales and profitability.

Eastern European communists pressed 'reforms' even further. Czechoslovak Ota Sik's *Plan and Market under Socialism* appeared in 1965, urging many market mechanisms in place of central planning. Other contemporary publications in English reflecting changing views of socialist development included *Planning, Profit, and Incentives in the USSR* (Myron E Sharpe, ed), *Planning the Labour Force in Hungary* (Janos Timor), *Yugoslav Economists on Problems of a Socialist Economy* (Radmila Stojanovic, ed), all advocating an expanded role for markets over planned economic activity.

Western non-communist Marxists – in the early 1960s, representing less a movement than an intellectual pole – availed themselves of the relative tempering of anti-communism and left-wing repression to found two influential left journals: *New Left Review* (Britain) and *Studies on the Left* (US). In the US, *Monthly Review* (long associated with Sweezy and Baran) gathered a broader following; and *Science and Society* (a theoretical journal long close to the Communist Party USA) attracted a host of younger, independent writers influenced by Marxism.

The European peace and solidarity movement and the US civil rights and anti-war movement spawned a Western 'New Left' in the same era. The New Left was a politically amorphous, ideologically eclectic development, with Marxism on its organisational fringes and in academic niches. The New Left was never able to transcend its inherited anti-communist fears and stereotypes, however.

It was in this historic cauldron that the book *Monopoly Capital* was formed.

It is impossible to exaggerate, however, the effects of three additional vitally important and related factors influencing *Monopoly Capital* (and nearly every other contemporaneous left economic commentary): the legacy of the Great Depression; Keynesian economic analysis; and the post-war 'prosperity'.

The Great Depression and Marxist Crisis Theory

With the Great Depression, Marxists believed that they had found confirmation that capitalism was unsustainable and inevitably to be replaced by socialism; they presented its depth and duration as conclusive evidence of the Marxist analysis of capitalism. Further, many radical (and even some less than radical) thinkers viewed the Depression as a final chapter, the denouement of capitalism. They saw capitalist crisis as more than a cyclical process, a departure from stability, or a temporary imbalance. Rather, capitalism was afflicted with 'fatal' flaws that were inevitably leading to its demise. This apocalyptic concept of crisis is borne out by many book titles of the era: *The Final Crisis* (Allen Hutt, 1935), *The Coming*

Struggle for Power (John Strachey, 1933), *The Decline of American Capitalism* (Lewis Corey, 1934), *Toward Soviet America*, (William Z Foster, 1932), and others.

For Marxists and left analysts of the time, *systemic* crisis was the watchword. At one extreme, the view held sway that capitalism was headed for breakdown under the weight of its own unique contradictions. At the other extreme, capitalism was suffering a series of increasingly debilitating 'strokes' that would suffice, combined with an increasingly hard pressed, but militant working class, to lead to a socialist revolution. Metaphors abound in these and similar projections, but two theories, both with supporting passages found in Marx's writings, emerged to explain the systemic crisis of capitalism: the law of the tendency of the falling rate of profit (eg John Strachey in *The Nature of Capitalist Crisis*) and the "poverty and restricted consumption of the masses as opposed to the drive of capitalist production to develop the productive forces as though only the absolute consuming power of society constituted their limit"[1] (eg Eugen Varga in *The Decline of Capitalism*).

It was a view like the latter that came to be favoured by the authors in *Monopoly Capital* (the theory was found in embryo in the Paul Sweezy's *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, 1942). Theories like Baran and Sweezy's, Varga's and those of many other political economists of the era bear the unfortunate tag of 'under-consumptionism', a term that conjures a failure to clear the market of products because of the limited buying power of the masses. Indeed, this is a popular understanding of the Marxist theory of economic stagnation, crisis, or breakdown. But, as Joseph A Schumpeter and others note,[2] there are other interpretations of 'under-consumptionism' beyond a vulgar theory of a mere mismatch between buyer and seller, inadequate consumer buying power coupled with excess production. The simple answer to the simple version of 'under-consumptionism' is Say's Law: sellers always find buyers and vice versa when they settle on an exchange rate; seemingly excessive production will find a price that will clear the market, and the market will discipline production and demand accordingly.

In the twentieth century, it was the raw facticity of the Great Depression and John Maynard Keynes' celebrated theoretical edifice that combined to give life to the view that the capitalist economic mechanism was far more complicated than the barter-like economy that Jean-Baptiste Say chose as a model; instead, it was understood to be a complex structure with many interstices where demand and supply could fail to match, places where inadequate demand could disrupt the smooth operation of the capitalist economy. Keynes gave theoretical insight to the readily apparent observation that collapsing demand gave rise to further collapsing demand as the Great Depression proceeded. Thus, recovery could not be the result of self-correcting processes but, in his view and the view of his followers, the result of induced or created demand. Further, his theory explores some of the internal processes of capitalism – principally savings and investment – that serve as conduits and regulators of economic activity, demonstrating that they could, under some conditions, disrupt the balance of supply with demand.

Despite the fact that *Monopoly Capital* only extends limited credit to the work of Maynard Keynes, it is apparent that the authors, like most post-World War II communist, Marxist, and neo-Marxist writers, drew substantially upon Keynes's thinking.[3] Any survey of left commentators in the two decades leading up to the book's publication would show a near obsession with the question of demand in some incarnation or another. A general consensus arose, for example, that military spending policies bolstered by Cold War hysteria served US capitalism as an effective source of stimulation – stimulation that would forestall economic stagnation or decline.

An example of the consensus can be found in Joseph M Gillman's curious book, *Prosperity in Crisis* (Marzani and Munsell, New York, 1965). It is curious for no other reason than that it is largely forgotten today, though it covered many of the same questions as *Monopoly Capital* and appeared a year earlier. In fact, in a somewhat snarky review of *Monopoly Capital*, Gillman[4] reminded the reader that, in his own writings, he anticipated several claims made by Sweezy and Baran, including their "almost-discovery" of the tendency of the surplus to rise.

Gillman devoted nearly a quarter of his book to a critical and admirably lucid discussion of Keynes and his theory. While he challenged elements of the theory, he enthused:

> "None of these faults, however, detracts from the usefulness of the powerful tool for economic analysis which Keynes forged with his theory of effective demand."[5]

Further demonstrating the ubiquity of Keynes's analysis, Gillman attributed the attention paid to Keynes to the fact that:

> "... his theoretical principles and his policy recommendations today dominate the economic thinking of most capitalist economists and capitalist states .... Keynes with an assist from the Great Depression conquered the capitalist academic mind and the minds of practical capitalist politicians."[6]

And, we might add, the anti-capitalist left.

The left infatuation with Keynes and so-called 'under-consumption' theories was encouraged by the more than two decades of relatively persistent growth and stability in the US and Europe that followed the Second World War. Some Marxists expected a severe downturn to follow the peace. The return of millions of about-to-be unemployed combatants and the retreat of massive wartime deficit spending suggested a relapse to the chronic problems existing before the US entered the war.

But no severe persistent downturn, no return to depression, ensued beyond 1946.

Largely committed to looking at economic processes through a Keynes-like lens and struggling to explain the absence of a postwar downturn, many Marxists opined that stability was established by newly released demand foregone by wartime austerity, as well as by veterans' benefits, the massive spending generated by the Marshall Plan, and the Cold War military build-up in the wake of the war. No doubt these were indeed decisive factors.

But, as the years passed, bourgeois economists boasted that policy makers – enlightened by Keynes – had solved the perils of insufficient demand; severe crises were a thing of the past. Of course this presented a serious challenge to Gillman, Sweezy, and others embracing the 'under-consumptionist' approach. Maurice Dobb, in a review of *Monopoly Capital*, referred to this disposition as "... the attitude of 'waiting for another 1929' to happen".[7] Apart from minor hiccups, no major downturn occurred through the mid-1960s. Sweezy and Baran acknowledge that:

> "The Great Depression of the 1930s accorded admirably with Marxian theory, and its occurrence of course greatly strengthened the belief that similar catastrophic economic downturns were inevitable in the future. And yet, much to the surprise of many Marxists, two decades have passed since the end of the Second World War without the recurrence of severe depression."[8]

Did this mean that capitalism had stabilised and was, henceforth, stable, as capitalism's apologists maintained? Did this put to rest Marxist crisis theory?

The 'Economic Surplus'

Faced with these challenging questions, Gillman and Sweezy/Baran recast the contradiction of capitalism in a similar way: the problem of the absorption of the economic surplus. In Gillman's words:

> "The task … has been to discover the means that may be available in an advanced capitalist economy for absorbing all the investible funds, or social surplus, which it can create."[9]

Similarly, Sweezy and Baran organise their work around the "... central theme: the generation and absorption of the surplus under conditions of monopoly capitalism."[10]

While both Gillman and Sweezy/Baran reject the explanation in Marx's *Capital*, Volume III, of capitalism's tendency of the falling rate of profit (*tfrp*), they share with it the recognition that capitalist surplus enables a damaging over-accumulation of surplus, resulting in the system's dysfunction. Despite vastly different understandings of the mechanism of over-accumulation, and equally disparate interpretations of the consequences of over-accumulation, nearly all Marxist crisis theories put it at the centre of their explanatory universe. The drive to accumulate more and more capital invariably overruns, in one way or another, the bounds of profitability (tfrp), the ability to absorb surplus, the available demand or some other feature essential to the stable course of capitalism or its legitimacy.

For Sweezy and Baran, the concentration and accumulation of vast amounts of 'surplus' presents a problem of realisation, finding a place to engage it productively or unproductively. *Monopoly Capital* argues that over-accumulation can be met in three ways: *consumption, investment or waste*. But *consumption* is restricted, they maintain, by the distributional inequities (limited workers' share) of capitalism; and *investment* is limited because:

> "Sooner or later, excess capacity grows so large that it discourages further investment. When investment declines, so do income and employment and hence also surplus itself. In other words, this investment pattern is self-limiting and ends in economic downturn – the beginning of a recession or depression."[11]

Therefore, capitalism must forego crisis by engaging in *waste* – military spending, the sales effort, government spending, etc.

First and foremost, in their view, **capitalism is an irrational system.** Thus, the central contradiction of capitalism (in its monopoly stage) is not its propensity to fail in some way, but its irrationality.

Gillman makes essentially the same point from a different perspective:

> "It is in this manner that the prosperity of mid-twentieth century America must be evaluated. First the hot war and the cold war absorbed enormous amounts of accumulated and accumulating excess capital and excess output. These, first, took us out of the Great Depression and then kept the economy operating at relatively full employment. Now we cannot relax these expenditures; we must, indeed, continually increase them, as the excess social surplus continues to grow, or find other substitutes for private investment, if we are to avoid another depression. In this lies the crisis of America's postwar prosperity. It is a new form of economic crisis."[12]

It is impossible not to notice that both accounts project a new theory based on a need to account for the post-war "prosperity" (Gillman) or the post-war failure of "recurrence of severe depression" (Sweezy and Baran). In other words, both are compelled by their own Keynes-like assumptions to address the apparent 'success' of Keynes-based responses to the threat of severe economic disruptions.

Both rejected, as well, an interpretation of crisis as a tendency for a falling rate of profit because *tfrp* appears at odds with Keynes' focus on effective demand and because of their independent research on profitability and the broader term, 'surplus'. Gillman's 1957 book *The Falling Rate of Profit* was accepted by many contemporaries as convincingly showing that there was no *long-term* tendency for profit to fall. Similarly, *Monopoly Capital's* appendix, based on Joseph D Phillips' work, purported to show a long-term trend of surplus expansion, the basis for Sweezy and Baran's counter-law of "the tendency of the surplus to rise".

But perhaps that conclusion is too hasty. An early critical review of *Monopoly Capital* written by Otto Nathan noted that the dismissal of the *tfrp* alternative was done "[i]n an almost cavalier fashion."[13]

Defenders of *tfrp* do not surrender to these objections easily. The translation into Marxist categories of the economic categories developed by bourgeois economists, and found in official statistics, is not conceded by advocates. Nor is the interpretation of the *long-term* trends without its critics.

Further, the *long-term* trend of surplus growth is not necessarily decisive for those who understand *tfrp* to be expressed episodically. Indeed, in one possible interpretation, a downturn generated by profit rate decline would likely be followed by an even sharper momentary rise in the surplus thanks to a rise in the rate of exploitation resulting from the weakened position of labour. Of course, that doesn't ensure that the surplus will find a profitable home at a moment when investment opportunities are disappearing. Indeed, for a capitalist, the increase in surplus may present an even larger problem of finding a place to invest. That is, a rise in the surplus may fail to overcome other factors determining an unfavorable profit environment, encouraging an investment strike.

Recurring, deepening episodic crises are consistent with a longer trajectory of rising surplus precisely because safe, profitable investments are more difficult to find. The destruction of capital by war, to cite a different kind of surplus-annihilation, is equally consistent with a long-term tendency for surplus to rise.

Where Sweezy, Baran, and Gillman locate capitalism's contradiction in the system's *success* in generating surplus,

other over-accumulation theories, like some versions of *tfrp*, place capitalist crisis in the *failure* of the accumulation process: its inability to continue to generate outcomes necessary for its function. Given the relatively long period of economic stability and growth and modestly rising living standards for most people after World War II, it is not remarkable that all three writers were dubious that accumulation would fail. Instead, they thought that its success was itself a failure, a failure to rationally employ the fruits of growth for the well-being of society.

In a review of Gillman's book, Paul Mattick, a staunch advocate for *tfrp,* brought some of the political differences between "excess surplus" theories and *tfrp* into sharper relief:

> "This 'new form of economic crisis' does not seem to be a crisis at all. If a depression can be prevented by way of government expenditures, and if there is a large enough surplus to allow for such expenditures, why should not prosperity continue unabated? Although Gillman professes to being a Marxist, his theory is the exact opposite of Marx's theory of accumulation. To put it briefly – for Marx, the capitalist system experiences periods of crisis and finally comes to its end because of a lack of profit, or surplus-value, relative to the accumulated capital. For Gillman – to put it just as briefly – capitalism is in crisis because 'the economy's profit-producing potentialities are greater than its profit-consuming potentialities.' For Marx, the rate of profit falls in the course of capital formation; for Gillman there is too much 'excess social surplus', which condemns the system to increasingly larger unproductive expenditures. If that were all that bothers the system it really has no problem, for nothing could be easier than to increase unproductive expenditures."[14]

The same question could be asked of Sweezy and Baran: if absorbing the surplus is the challenge to modern capitalism, why is it a problem at all, since the absorption mechanisms so persuasively identified in *Monopoly Capitalism* could continue seemingly without limit? Sure, it's an irrational, wasteful answer to the challenge of excess surplus, but one consistent with a sustainable 'prosperous' capitalism.

While no one should doubt Baran, Sweezy, or Gillman's personal commitment to socialism (Sweezy and Gillman paid the US Cold War premium of intellectual isolation, a cost often unknown to or unacknowledged by their more secure academic critics), the 'economic surplus' school invites incrementalism, social-democratic reformism and revolutionary pessimism. Like all theories that base capitalism's ills on insufficient demand, a remedy is readily at hand: **generate the demand** and all is well. Since its popularisation, demand-based theories of capitalism's dysfunction have fueled social-democratic and other forms of reformism. If capitalism can be repaired with 'demand'-securing 'band-aids', then we can reform it into a kind and gentle socio-economic system. The struggle becomes a struggle for shifting the surplus from waste and unproductive activities to human needs – a worthy goal, but not necessarily a struggle for socialism.

Sweezy and Baran's (and Gillman's) revolutionary pessimism carried over to a pessimism over the revolutionary potential of the working class. Both *Monopoly Capitalism* and *Prosperity in Crisis* submit that workers in the US are no longer to be found at the centre of revolutionary change. Sweezy and Baran say:

> "The answer of traditional Marxian orthodoxy – that the industrial proletariat must eventually rise in revolution against its capitalist oppressors – no longer carries conviction. Industrial workers are a diminishing minority of the American working class, and their organised cores in the basic industries have to a large extent been integrated into the system as consumers and ideologically conditioned members of the society. They are not, as the industrial workers were in Marx's day, the system's special victims …."[15]

Rather, like so many others at the time, they invested their faith in social change in the struggles of the so-called Third World – those countries caught in the web of colonialism and imperialism. Socialism, they argued, would more likely be a consequence of the Third World fight for independence. Unfortunately, with the benefit of hindsight, that faith may have been misplaced.

It would be a commission of the genetic fallacy to object to the views advocated by Sweezy, Baran or Gillman simply because they were framed at a time of the pervasive influence of Keynes or in the context of an unexpected, atypical era of economic stability or in an atmosphere of free-wheeling, extremely divergent thought. Their views must stand or fall on how they fit reality. At the same time, Marxists cannot ignore the truth that ideas are, in important ways, products peculiar to their times. And the ideas propping the theory advocated in *Monopoly Capital* were certainly grounded in the events of the moment. That becomes even clearer as the period subsequent to its publication unfolds.

In the following decade, the US economy experienced a succession of seemingly intractable swings of inflation, unemployment, recession, and profits[16] that foiled the Keynesian tools of policy-makers and tarnished the once nearly complete awe of Keynes felt by so many theorists. The stability so apparent to Sweezy, Baran and others in 1966 was rocked by the turmoil of the succeeding period. In the world of academic Marxists, fashion swung toward alternative explanations of the unstable seventies such as the 'profit-squeeze' theory.[17]

We shall return to assess *Monopoly Capital*'s relevance to the twenty-first century.

The Monopoly in *Monopoly Capital*

The 23-year-old Frederick Engels, writing on political economy before his collaboration with Karl Marx, offered the following thoughts on competition and monopoly:

> "We have seen that in the end everything comes down to competition, so long as private property exists …. The opposite of *competition* is *monopoly.* Monopoly was the war cry of the mercantilists; competition the battle cry of the liberal economists. It is easy to see that this antithesis is again quite hollow. Every competitor cannot but desire to have the monopoly …. Competition is based on self-interest, and self-interest in turn breeds monopoly. In short, competition passes over into monopoly. On the other hand, monopoly cannot stem the tide of competition – indeed, it itself breeds competition …."[18]

In this very earliest published tract on Marxist political economy, Engels anticipates the inevitable rise of monopoly so long as "self-interest" exists. But at the same time he

recognises the dialectical relation of monopoly and competition: "competition passes over into monopoly" but "indeed, it itself breeds competition". In this passage, Engels exposes the underlying logic of an enduring *process*: the accumulation of wealth in an economy based on private ownership invariably leads to concentration, but the existence and emergence of others eager to contest monopolies produces further competition. Subsequently, that round of competition produces winners and losers and further concentration. And so on, unless abated by other forces. Thus, in Engels' view, competition and monopoly are not incompatible, but dialectically inseparable, a dynamic unity.

Seventy-three years later, Lenin recognised that the global concentration of capital had achieved, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a quantitative level sufficient to produce giant cartels, groups of capitalist enterprises dominating sectors of economic activity, commanding the heights of national economies, and spreading their tentacles internationally. He acknowledges that mature capitalism leads

> "... to such a concentration of production and capital that monopoly has been and is the result: cartels, syndicates and trusts and, merging with them, the capital of a dozen or so banks manipulating thousands of millions. At the same time, monopoly, which has grown out of free competition, *does not abolish the latter, but exists over it and along side of it, and thereby gives rise to a number of very acute, intense antagonisms, friction, and conflicts*."[19] [My emphasis]

Apart from the identification of a mature *stage* of capitalism, Lenin's contribution echoes, in an important way, Engels' dialectics of monopoly and competition: monopoly that is "grown out of free competition" nevertheless "exists over it and along side of it". A monopoly stage of capitalism coexists with the *process* of competition that itself *bred* monopoly.

Assuredly, the Lenin of the pamphlet *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* acknowledges the most intense competition imaginable, writing in the midst of a bloody war brought on by fierce competition between monopolies for a division of the world.

It was this ongoing process of concentration occurring in a field of intense competition that constitutes the Marxist concept of monopoly. And the higher reaches of enterprises standing atop the capitalist pyramid constitute the Marxist concept of monopoly capitalism. Their size, power and reach separate them from the rest.

But Sweezy and Baran took this concept a step further: they envision a qualitatively different stage of capitalism that replaces the laws of competitive capitalist development with a different set of laws believed to be characteristic of this higher stage. They see a system that replaces competition with something that might be called 'co-respect' between monopoly corporations; they see prices determined not by an objective measure of value, but by collusion and the last penny of profit squeezed from a consumer mesmerised by the sales effort; they see, paradoxically, a corporate oligarchy retarding innovation to forestall the costs of new investment while embracing the cost savings made available by innovations in order to raise profits.[20]

Sweezy and Baran recognised that *Monopoly Capital* was a departure from classical Marxism:

> "The Marxian analysis of capitalism still rests in the final analysis on the assumption of a competitive economy."[21]

Thus, they saw the essay as advocating a radical break from that tradition, a break based upon rejecting the centrality of competition. Furthermore, they saw the break as grounded in monopoly as a *qualitative* change in modern capitalism. They take Hilferding to task for underestimating its role:

> "Hilferding did not treat it as a *qualitatively* new element in the capitalist economy; rather he saw it as effecting essentially *quantitative* modifications of the basic Marxian laws of capitalism".[22] [my emphases]

Monopoly Capital draws a sharp line between competition and monopoly:

> "We must recognise that competition, which was the predominant form of market relations in nineteenth-century Britain, has ceased to occupy that position, not only in Britain but everywhere else in the capitalist world. Today the typical economic unit … [is] ... a large-scale enterprise producing a significant share of the output of an industry, or even several industries …."[23]

Sweezy and Baran give due credit to the works of bourgeois economists Joan Robinson and E H Chamberlin (and Keynes) in shaping those features offered as unique to monopoly enterprises and their relationship. But to understand the intuitive plausibility of the theory, it is, once again, useful to revisit the era that nurtured *Monopoly Capital* and drew others to its and similar ideas.

The capitalist world in 1966 was a world dominated by the United States. In terms of global power, the US functioned as a monopoly in the capitalist world. It set the agenda and enforced that agenda throughout the capitalist sphere. Like an ideal-type monopoly, the US set standards for virtually every aspect of life within reach of its influence: economic life, politics and culture. The defeated nations of World War II were only beginning to participate fully in the global market on their own footing. Britain, the leading capitalist power in 1910, controlled 23.6% of all financial assets at that time. By 1966, the US (and Canada) controlled 47% of all financial assets; Japan, about to emerge as a very serious economic rival controlled 21.6% of all financial assets.

In the US, entire industries were dominated by three or fewer giant corporations. Standing as a bright symbol – almost a caricature – for extreme concentration was the giant telecommunication firm American Telephone and Telegraph which monopolised consumer communication for virtually the entire US. Three companies sold all but a few independently-produced or niche-market automobiles in the US. General Electric stood at the top of a few commanding electrical and electronic firms. US Steel enjoyed a similar role in the steel industry, as did Alcoa in aluminum production, while International Business Machine was far and away the world's largest manufacturer of computers and office machinery. A powerful case could be made that not only was the US economy demonstrating greater and greater concentration, but that it had arrived as the perfect exemplar of a monopoly or semi-monopoly economy with only token competition between corporate behemoths.

A company like General Motors basked in the knowledge that its revenue was greater than the national income of many countries. It offered multiple automotive brands

corresponding to different price levels – budget to luxury. Within those brands, the company created sub-brands or models. Product differentiation was notional and cosmetic. Ford and Chrysler offered counterpart brands with similar features and prices. Competition was most intense in the arena of advertising and in the sales effort.

General Motors had spread into armament sales, financing, public transportation, aircraft manufacturing, including foreign acquisitions. Only the emerging of smaller foreign cars posed a challenge to GM, Ford, and Chrysler's monopoly status, a challenge that GM rose to meet in the 1960s. In a real sense, General Motors was the ideal expression for Sweezy and Baran's monopoly enterprise. GM achieved massive profits, stabilised prices, maintained huge bureaucracies, lived and breathed an unabashed corporate culture, and spent lavishly on the sales effort.

In 1967, the average car sold in the US for the equivalent of 5.2 months of the average median household income (in 2013, the number is 7.3 months).

The economic world of 1966 assuredly mirrored in important ways the image drawn by Sweezy and Baran in their chapter on 'The Giant Corporation', but did they really capture the logic of the modern economy? Did this vivid snapshot represent the long-term trajectory of capitalism?

Some certainly believed that it did. British Communist Party leader John Gollan, in an essay entitled *The Struggle Against Imperialism and the New Stage in the Development of Monopoly*, summarises approvingly and quotes extensively from *Monopoly Capital*, offering its explanation as fitting the realities of the 1969 UK economy[24]

Others were not so sure. Otto Nathan, in an early review of *Monopoly Capital* notes[25] that in 1964 there were "... almost five million firms (excluding agriculture, professional services and self employed people without employees) ...", most of which were not the giant corporations of Sweezy and Baran's attention. Drawing on Sweezy and Baran's figures, Nathan went on to note that non-incorporated enterprises showed profits equal to 60% of all corporations. And, of course, not all corporate profits are from the giant monopolies. Does the monopoly model actually capture the dynamics of the modern economy?, Nathan asks.

Another set of figures reported by M Barabanov demonstrates the vigorous economic activity that churns below the high reaches of monopoly concentration.[26] According to Barabanov, between 1951 and 1958, 2,813,000 small US firms went out of business, 3,394,00 new ones emerged, and 3,422,00 changed ownership. Understanding their role in the modern economy seems to be a piece of the story missing from *Monopoly Capital*.

Social and economic theories must be measured by the events that follow subsequently; they are tested not by how they fit the events of the moment, but by how they cohere with the events that follow. Some collide awkwardly; few slip through unmarked.

The following decades challenged the notion that, with monopoly, competition was on the wane. In step with Engels' dialectics of monopoly and competition, the settled post-war period of US economic dominance and extreme US corporate concentration and mastery of the domestic market was rocked by intense international competition.

As Robert Brenner shows in *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, the late sixties and beyond were a time of growing penetration of the once securely domesticated US market by head-to-head competition from European and Asian corporations. Countering Baran and Sweezy's theory of stable or rising prices and swelling surplus, Brenner writes, regarding this period, of:

> "...the inability of US manufacturers to fully realise their investments because of the increased downward pressure on prices that resulted from the unanticipated entry into the market of lower cost producers, especially from abroad."[27]

The notion of a new, powerful wave of competition engaging price competition is, of course, at odds with the tenets of the Sweezy and Baran theory.

Through much of the following three decades, the rate of profit was, at best, sluggish, often declining. The spring from which the law of rising surplus was sourced was seemingly drying up.

Maurice Dobb, writing in a critical review of *Monopoly Capital*, warned of generalising the Sweezy and Baran theory to the rest of the capitalist world. He cites Lenin's admonition regarding uneven development:

> "If so mechanical a view as that all capitalist countries must follow identical roads were true, there would be little place for 'uneven development of capitalism', which Lenin held to be a leading characteristic of the world situation in his day."[28]

Ironically, the thrust of his criticism springs from the notion that some Western European countries might pass over the US stage of hyper-monopoly on to socialism, a notion that proved to be unfulfilled in his time. Nonetheless, the admonition was valid, as the succeeding years proved.

Monopoly Capital in the Twenty-first Century

Were they alive, the authors of *Monopoly Capital* would not recognise either the US economy or the global economy today. In no way is that meant as a criticism. Capitalism, for all its shortcomings and regardless of its prospects, remains a dynamic system. With few exceptions, economists have struggled to anticipate even a few of the changes witnessed over the last fifty years. Hasty conclusions over the loci of manufacturing, the role of technology, the intensity of trade, the 'nationality' of corporations, the role and significance of finance, and many other developments have led thinkers out of the woods and then back in. Humility remains the single most important trait for an economic theorist – bourgeois or Marxist.

But there are several features of the global capitalist economy in the years leading up to and in the twenty-first century that shed light on the road taken by Sweezy and Baran. Probably the most dramatic development is the return of financial shocks and severe downturns.

While so-called 'stagflation' plagued the US economy in the 1970s, it challenged conventional Keynesian thought and practice more than it did the Sweezy/Baran paradigm; stagnation was one of the consequences Sweezy and Baran saw as emerging with the law of rising surplus (even if other realities at that time were out of sync with the paradigm).

The US Savings and Loan crisis struck in the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. The collapse of hundreds of financial institutions and the associated bailout were largely seen as a policy failure and not a systemic defect. Most left/liberal commentators were, without deeper investigation, perfectly content to blame the collapse on financial anarchy caused by

deregulation. The deregulation charge served the left and liberals well since they shared the political target of Reagan-era Republican conservatism and embraced the term 'neoliberalism' to capture the turn away from Keynes and towards unfettered markets and market fetishism.

A moment of 'I told you so' validated the yearning for a return to the 'tame' markets of the sixties for many on the US left.

At the end of the 1990s, a series of regional crises – East Asia, Russia, and Brazil – shook the global capitalist system. Some took this as further evidence that capitalism had entered a period of long-term decline (1972 onwards) after the long 'postwar boom' (1946-1972). Robert Brenner was one important proponent of this view (*The Economics of Global Turbulence: A special report on the world economy, 1950-1998)*. His study, while offering no comprehensive theory of capitalist crisis, was an impressive argument for the role of intensified competition in disrupting capitalist stability. The rivalries of emerging powerhouses like Japan, Taiwan, and Germany imposed pressure on prices, revenues and earnings. New technologies and manufacturing techniques further fueled corporate fights for markets. And new industries and innovative products penetrated or threatened formerly secure markets, spurring competitive races to stay ahead in the race to win consumers.

John Bellamy Foster, one of *Monopoly Capital's* staunchest and most able defenders, correctly saw this intensification of competition as a challenge to the account of monopoly propounded in the Sweezy/Baran book.[29] Given that the Sweezy/Baran opus identifies monopoly with the absence or decline of competition, the era of intense competition recounted by Brenner does, in fact, refute their understanding of monopoly, an understanding that reflects a simplistic and rigid counterposing of two processes: concentration of capital and capitalist competition.

While academic economists have assumed that concentration and competition stand in an inverse relationship, there is no logical reason to assume that relationship. Nor is there any strong factual evidence, as Brenner's careful study shows.

But it would be equally mistaken, as Brenner may have assumed, that competition, intense competition, or intensifying competition is inconsistent with a continuing process of concentration or 'monopolisation'. Foster is correct in objecting to Brenner's dismissal of *Monopoly Capital* as merely reflecting "... quite temporary and specific aspects of the economy of the US in the 1950s".[30] If Brenner sees the process of concentration as fleeting, he is wrong. *Monthly Review,* long associated with the views of Sweezy and Baran, has shown and continues to demonstrate the ongoing process of concentration, most dramatically expressed by mergers and acquisitions.

But the global capitalist economy is in constant motion, and like an economic version of the cosmological big bang, it frequently generates new enterprises, new industries, innovative products, all in intense competition with one another. At the same time, those corporations commanding the heights of the global economy at any moment tend to grow larger and stronger at the expense of the weak and vulnerable. It is a mistake of bourgeois economics to see monopoly as the result of a closed, one-directional process in lock-step with the decline of competition. Rather, monopoly is a quantitative process with its own trajectory; competition both generates it and diminishes it, as Engels explained. Thus, though economic units tended to concentrate through Brenner's era of "global turbulence" (an era that continues today), they also experienced intense competition (as they do today).

The twenty-first century brought further dramatic changes in the global economy: a crash relatively localised to the US, a crash shaking the very foundations of the global economy, and longer periods of stagnation or economic malaise between and after the two episodes. The sixteen years following the end of the last century brought economic turmoil and uncertainty unseen since the Great Depression.

With the benefit of immediate hindsight, it is tempting to see the last decade and a half as the climax of Brenner's "global turbulence", an aggravation of the conditions festering since the so-called 'post-war boom'.

The economic crash of 2007-2008 generated a panic unseen since the Great Depression. Attending to modest inflation, manageable unemployment, rising home values, increasing consumption (and consumer debt) and soaring equity values, mainstream economists and social commentators were caught completely off-guard by the failure of massive financial institutions and the ensuing chaos. Nor did most left and liberal economists anticipate the disaster, offering psychological (excessive greed, a 'casino' mentality), ideological ('neoliberalism'), political (deregulation) or technical (financial engineering) explanations, but no account placing the cause of the crisis in the logic of capitalism.

The demand-centric theorists retreated to Keynes out of habit and desperation, but they could locate no proximate cause of the financial collapse in insufficient demand. Certainly demand collapsed *after* the onset of the crisis, but they were pressed to find the demand deficiency that *preceded* and caused financial collapse. Though Keynesians shared the prescription for recovery of demand-enhancing remedies, seven years of monetary Keynesian treatment have failed yet to vitalise the global economy.

A few Marxist-oriented economists revisited the tendency-of-the-falling-rate-of-profit (*tfrp*) analysis, especially in the wake of the crisis, but departed little from the somewhat mechanical and fatalistic formulations of Henryk Grossmann and Paul Mattick. The account that Marx gave, in *Capital* Volume III, with his postulation of a systemic falling rate of profit, is surely a profound insight. It serves as a guideline and not a formula for addressing the challenges to the capitalist class in sustaining profitability in the face of an ever growing accumulation of capital. It must not be taken as an iron law, but a bound and complex tendency. Nonetheless, it remains a key to understanding the cause of economic crisis.

For those influenced by the ideas introduced by *Monopoly Capital*, the 2007-2008 crisis presents problems. Both the dot.com crash and the subsequent financial crash were not readily explicable in terms of the theory propounded by Sweezy and Baran. Building on the experience of the apparent post-war stability, stagnation was the new norm of monopoly capitalism, a norm ensured by the absorption of monopoly's surplus by whatever means available or imaginable, including irrational waste. Their toolbox included no explanation for a collapse reminiscent of the Great Depression.

The loyalists at *Monthly Review* sought to rescue the theory by introducing a concept – 'financialisation' – and grafting it onto the theory. On this view, the 2007-2008 crisis was a direct result of 'financialisation'. Indeed, there has been an observed increase in the percentage share of GDP and an even greater percentage share of profits accounted for by the financial sector since the early 1980s. But to explain the crisis in terms of merely acknowledging this trend seems to beg the question of

how this trend caused the collapse. How does introducing the descriptive term explain anything? How does the larger role of finance fit into the *Monopoly Capital* theory? How does it relate to the law of the rising surplus?

One suspects that 'financialisation' – a term in far wider use than in *Monthly Review* circles – is an empty neologism, a hedge against theoretical uncertainty. Like its forebearer 'globalisation', 'financialisation' fills a space where little further understanding exists.

But the problem presented by 'financialisation' points to a far bigger problem for *Monopoly Capital*: the 'waste' basket. According to the Sweezy/Baran collaboration,

> "... surplus can be absorbed in the following ways: (1) it can be consumed, (2) it can be invested, and (3) it can be wasted."[31]

And for capitalism to continue without crises (given assumed limits on consumption and investment and continual growth of accumulation), the 'waste' basket must be constantly filling. In the era of *Monopoly Capital*'s publication, Sweezy and Baran found waste and irrationality in military spending, the sales effort, especially advertising, financial services, and government. But is this really a useful way of understanding these institutions and activities and their role in capitalist society? Is their primary role actually to dispose of an ever growing surplus? Does their characterisation as surplus-eaters help us understand their function in the years following the book's appearance?

The US imperial project and its accompanying military spending, for example, functions today as the guarantor of global capitalist economic stability; and its costs are, at the same time, entrenched as reliable sources of capitalist profitability. The sales effort, as well, has been integrated fully into the cultural fabric and the profit-generating mechanism so that it is as essential to exchange realisation as transportation and distribution have been in the past.

Government, on the other hand, has seen its growth retarded. Capitalist policy-makers of every stripe are making reducing government spending a shared goal at every level.

The Sweezy/Baran theory also underestimates the growth potential of investment. In the years since the book's publication, the People's Republic of China as well as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam have been integrated into the global capitalist market, drawing enormous investment. The collapse of Eastern European socialism has, likewise, added new entries to the capitalist system, attracting investment capital. The so-called 'emerging markets' equally draw capital (surplus) as they compete as low-cost producers. Each destination for investment of surplus in turn becomes a location of rising consumption.

Today, the enlarged role of the financial sector in the US, Britain and other countries' economies is an important factor in understanding the twenty-first century crisis when interpreted properly. In fact, it was capital searching for an acceptable return in an environment of oversupplied capital markets that drove the lending and financial speculation that crashed global markets. The hyper-accumulation that followed the explosion of low-cost, low-wage production in the new Asian, Eastern European, and Latin American centres of production (and US and European centres experiencing the full weight of low-wage competition) flooded financial markets with capital. But, since capital cannot remain idle, it migrated to riskier and riskier investments (start-ups, mortgages, engineered financial instruments, etc).

Insofar as hyper-accumulation and a flood of capital overwhelmed consumption and productive investment in the period preceding the 2007-2008 collapse, Sweezy and Baran did anticipate the cause of the twenty-first century crisis. In their vernacular, a rising surplus cannot always be absorbed by consumption and *conventional*, *productive* investment. But the logic of capitalism, while it may appear irrational from a socially responsible perspective, does not countenance unprofitable waste. Instead, capitalists invariably seek profit; and when faced with limited conventional, productive investment opportunities, they invariably seek profits in unconventional and even parasitic investments. That is the insight behind Marx's famous imperative: "Accumulate, accumulate! This is Moses and the Prophets!" This admonition is perhaps underestimated in *Monopoly Capital*.

More could be said about the causes of twenty-first century crisis and its relevance to Marxist crisis theory, but it would take us well beyond an appreciation of *Monopoly Capital*. Suffice it to say that any adequate theory must take into account capitalism's inherent tendency to over-accumulate. What that means is the subject of further study.

If we are to fault *Monopoly Capital*, it is because its vision had far too close a horizon. Sweezy and Baran captured an untypical moment in capitalism's trajectory, the apogee of what Thomas Piketty called "Trente Glorieuses".[32] For Piketty, the period after World War II was a rare trough in the long upward ascent of inequality, a time when capitalism's typical features were muted. US capitalism in the early 1960s was importantly different from pre-war capitalism and equally different from what came after. Piketty's findings and recent history combine to make a compelling case that the Sweezy/Baran theory suffers only because it generalised upon the authors' admirably perceptive grasp of an era atypical of the course of twentieth century capitalism.

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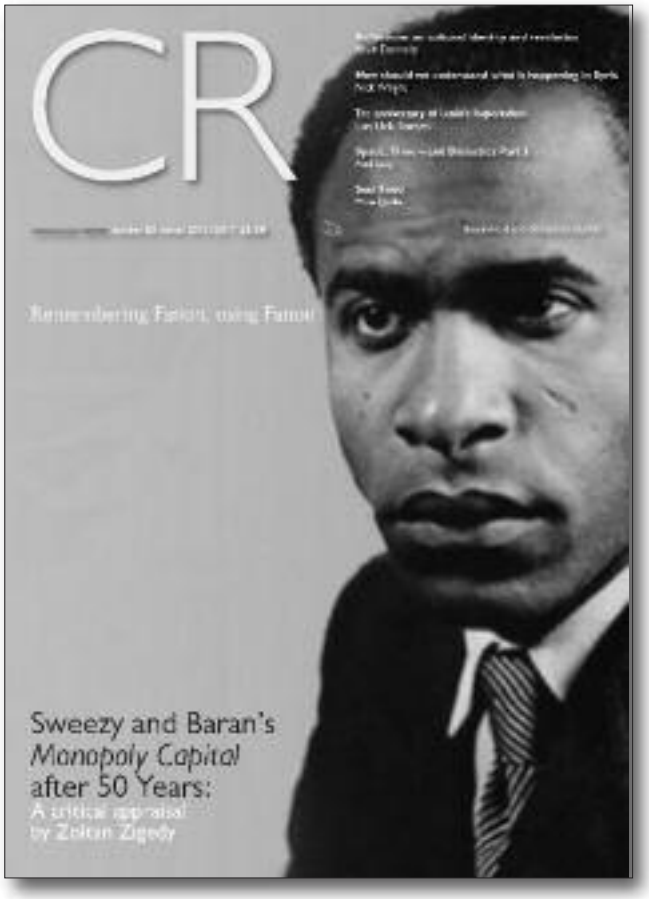

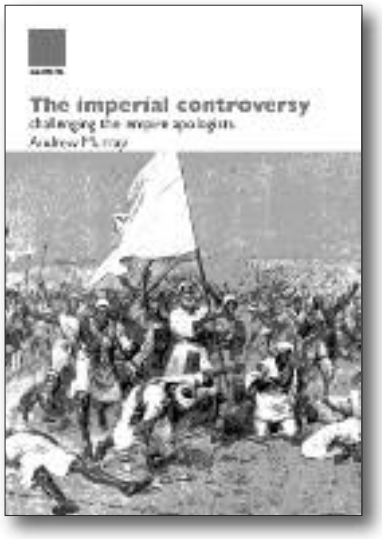

The imperialist urge, rooted in the dynamics of the world economy, continues to cast a long shadow. Andrew Murray subjects the leading pro-imperial historians, including Niall Ferguson, to a withering analysis. He presents an alternative reading of the record of the British Empire, and of other colonial powers, "… the better to develop an understanding as to why the last thing the great majority of the world wants to see is a repetition, however dressed up."

The history of imperial intervention in the Middle East and the phenomenon of liberal interventionism in general, and Blair's premiership in particular, is located in a history of argument within the progressive movement concerning imperialism. The record and role of the "pro-war left" in relation to the Iraq war comes under scrutiny.

The imperial controversy challenging the empire apologists *by Andrew Murray*
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Reflections on cultural iden

Remembering Fanon, *using* Fanon

by Kevin Donnelly

"In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon himself was highly critical of much of the social science research into the colonialism of his time, since this framed colonisation in a positive light, as the next stage of a civilising process, with the colonised waiting expectantly for the coloniser to bring the gifts of 'civilisation' to their shores."

Kevin Donnelly

tity and revolution

"[Brecht] would have been delighted, I like to think, at an argument, not for his greatness, or his canonicity, nor even for some new and unexpected value of posterity … as rather for his *usefulness*".[1]

I CAN STILL remember clearly the first time I encountered Frantz Fanon, and it was not the happiest of experiences. It was around 1997 and I was in my first year at university as a mature student on a youth and community studies course. As part of this, my tutor set an essay in which we were to demonstrate how radical, non-formal, education had been influenced by a number of key thinkers – we were to choose one from a list and one of the choices was Fanon.

However, researching the assignment – firstly by approaching Fanon directly through his key texts, particularly *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* – proved to be a truly bewildering experience. Here was indeed a strange 'bricolage' of literary references, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, medical terminology used in unusual contexts (the political, sociological) and reflections on negritude[2].

The Wretched of the Earth in particular appeared to be a mix of generalisations (about colonialism, Africa), 'folded up' into specific experiences (around Martinique, Algeria) only to then be 'folded out' to present Fanon's unique take on 'Third Worldism'[3].

The question then was (and still is), why bother? How actually relevant is Fanon 52 years after his last published work? Certainly his influence is commonly viewed as having been at its peak during the 1960s and the New Left. However, a counter-argument can be put forward that there has been a resurgence recently, particularly in academic circles associated with cultural studies and specifically on campuses in the United States.[4]

I was also intrigued by the claim made by David Macey in *Frantz Fanon: A Life*[5] that Fehrat Abbas[6], when asked to write the preface for *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, stated that he considered Fanon the only "authentic Marxist" of the Algerian Revolution. What did Abbas mean by this (if indeed he actually said it)?

The central question is therefore, how *useful* is Fanon in a "post-Cold-War, market rhetorical situation"[7]? In other words, is Fanon's political message now merely of academic interest (and therefore *didactic* in a narrow sense) or do his theories still resonate in the (revolutionary) sense of connecting (political) education with (class) struggle (and therefore *didactic* in the Marxist sense of the word)?

Fanon's life

Before answering this question, some background information might be in order. This is not the place, nor is there the space, to outline a detailed biography of the man – for that I would recommend Macey's biography. But, for those unfamiliar with Fanon: he was born in Martinique in 1925; after serving with distinction in the French army during World War 2, he became a doctor, later specialising in psychiatry; and in 1954 he accepted a post as a psychiatrist in Algeria. There, Fanon was able to witness the effects of colonisation first-hand; and, through these experiences, he joined, and then became an important figure in, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). He was later appointed as ambassador of the provisional government of Algeria (GPRA) to Ghana; and it was during his period that he discovered he had leukemia. He died from this in 1961.

Fanon's work

Fanon left behind a relatively small corpus of work, stretching from *Black Skin, White Masks* (1953) via *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* (1959) and *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) to, posthumously, *Towards the African Revolution* (1964). It was soon after his death that debates began to emerge around the nature of his work, particularly in relation to: his engagement with Marxism; the (problematic) role of violence in bringing about revolutionary change; the need to rethink class conflict in a colonial context; and the role of the colonised in this struggle.

Reading his work

So, in terms of *reading* Fanon, where to begin? A late twentieth century anthology *Fanon: A Critical Reader*[8] suggests a 5-stage approach to this:

1: Applications of his work, and critical debates surrounding it; for example, how his work has been applied in revolutionary practice, and its reception by mainstream Marxism shortly after his death.
2: Biographical work.
3: Research into his influence on political theory.
4: His corresponding influence on postmodern cultural and postcolonial studies.
5: His influence on original work across the full gamut of human studies.

The central claim made by the authors is that, far from there being a resurgence in interest in his work, Fanon's influence has continued to grow and resonate throughout the

years since his death, and has informed a diverse range of disciplines and practices as a consequence. However, another influential work, *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*[4], has put forward a more complex picture, in that each of these stages is in turn marked by significant internal disagreements and debates.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon himself was highly critical of much of the social science research into the colonialism of his time, since this framed colonisation in a positive light, as the next stage of a civilising process, with the colonised waiting expectantly for the coloniser to bring the gifts of 'civilisation' to their shores. What these approaches completely missed for Fanon is the point that he pithily makes, that colonialism's aim is to *destroy* existing cultures:

> "If, for instance, Martians undertook to colonise the earth men – not to initiate them into Martian culture but to *colonise* them – we should be doubtful of the persistence of any earth personality."[9]

Postcolonialism

It is arguably with regard to the question of colonialism that Fanon's work had the greatest impact in recent times, particularly in the context of *postcolonial* studies, and it is therefore to this area that we now turn. We need to start this by defining what *postcolonial* means, as a specific category of enquiry. This is important as the term is distinct from, but often confused with *post-colonialism*, which is a term normally used in a historical context, as in *aftercolonialism*.

Postcolonialism on the one hand recognises that many of the material conditions and modes of representation from colonial times are still present in post-colonial societies, as in the case of *neocolonialism*, for example; while, on the other, it recognises the ongoing necessity for bringing about change in these societies (and the challenges this will bring with it). The term is also notoriously imprecise and therefore covers a diverse range of meanings. In a positive sense, this diversity can be articulated in different ways as an enabling concept. However, the downside is that this plurality can lead to a great deal of confusion – for example it can cover work around diaspora identities, (national) culture and colonial discourses, to name but a few. For the sake of this discussion therefore – and in a literary context – we can define it here as involving:

1. The reading of texts by writers from countries with a history of colonialism and which are concerned with its legacy/ongoing impact.
2. Readings relating to the colonial diaspora.
3. Re-reading texts in relation to theories of colonial discourse.

Discourse refers to the way in which, in a colonial system, language and power of empire intersect, transmitting and reinforcing the value system of the coloniser which in turn is internalised by the colonised – through the colonial education system for example. The key term above is of course *reading*, but not in a neutral way; instead, postcolonialism issues a challenge to the representations and modes of perception contained within colonial discourses and asks us in turn to rethink conventional readings of these texts.

Fanon and Colonialism

Fanon's work has, it could be argued, made some important contributions to this. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, for example, he powerfully sets out to demonstrate how the colonised are objectified by the coloniser and defined as subhuman, and are therefore unable to determine their own identities which are instead made for them, in this case by the dominant French culture.

In mostly psychological terms, he then sets out the cost of this to the colonised subject who internalises their idea of self as the (inferior) *other*, sealed into "crushing objecthood"[10] and leading in turn to trauma and subjugation. As Fanon puts it, remembering an experience in France whereby a young white boy pointed to him and said, "Mama, see the Negro, I'm frightened! Frightened! Frightened!"[11],

> "On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed and made myself an object."[12]

Also:

> "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found I was an object in the midst of other objects."[11]

Fanon and Postcolonialism

To a certain extent, it could be argued that many of the early anti-colonial writings were often limited by accepting colonial forms of knowledge – for example, in terms of *national* representations and the way anti-colonial nationalist writing has sometimes mimicked the prescriptive tendencies and national chauvinism of the dominant powers. In *postcolonial* terms, therefore, any form of nationalism is invariably viewed in a pejorative light. Another problem with postcolonial studies is that colonialism is often analysed in a purely textual way rather than through an analysis of the concrete, material and socio-economic conditions which underpin the system.

Aspects of Fanon's work in particular have been sanitised for, and appropriated by, an academic audience, particularly in the United States;[10] and of course the problem with *(mis)appropriation* is that its purpose is often to nullify the political power of an ideology or movement. Has Fanon's work therefore been assimilated and (mis)appropriated and hence lost its (political) bite?

Fanon and Marxism

It important at this point to remember that Fanon's writings were inextricably shaped by concrete, *material* conditions at important stages in his life: as a *man of colour*; as an *Antillean* with an ambivalent relationship with both African and French culture; as a psychiatrist in *Algeria*, and so on. For example, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, although he primarily takes a psychological approach to the problem of race, he also recognises that it is:

> "… the economic and social conditions of class conflicts that explain and determine the real conditions in which individual sexuality expresses itself."[13]

This then leads us to a central question – was Fanon a Marxist? A straightforward Marxist reading of Fanon has always been open to interpretation, contested and therefore highly problematic. For example, Macey states that any debate around Fanon and Marxism invariably gets off to a false start:

> "Fanon shows little interest in Marxist theory and, whilst

he had obviously absorbed its general principles, there is no sign that he ever studied it in any depth. It was only because Rheda Malek[14] gave him a copy of it that he read the chapters on the 'force theory' (*theorie de la violence* in French) in Engel's *Anti-Duhring*; he found it 'too mild' and inappropriate in the Algerian context."[15]

These are not new criticisms: for example, Jack Woddis states that Fanon, in his denunciation of colonialism, lacks analytical power and is often instead given to "over-grand exaggeration, and a conclusion which leads nowhere and which therefore is quite quickly contradicted by some equally grandiloquent judgements."[16]

Woddis's critique particularly centres on the role of class and the issue of violence. With respect to the latter in particular, he accuses Fanon of making "almost a mystique out of violence",[17] and supports this with a quote from Fanon:

"Violence, alone, violence committed by the people, violence organised and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them."[18]

For Woddis, on the other hand, the violence in the colonial system was inherent and explainable with reference to "particular methods and forms of exploitation – forced labour, poll tax, migrant Labour …."[17] In other words, it was largely discriminate and a necessary means to achieve specific political and economic ends.

What is interesting in the Fanon quote above however is his reference to the *people*, as it could be argued that this seemingly innocuous term says much about Fanon's attitude to class relations in a colonial context. In this, Fanon places a particular emphasis on the role of the *peasantry*, linking this in turn to the issue of *violence*:

"The peasantry is systematically disregarded for the most part by the propaganda put out by the nationalist parties. And it is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system, is first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays."[19]

For Woddis, these ideas were at best contradictory – for example, how could the peasantry *potentially* fulfil a role as a revolutionary force, in fact, the *sole* revolutionary force, if they are the most conservative stratum of society? At worst, Woddis believed that this led to Fanon downplaying the role of the working class who, Fanon considered, belonged in a colonial context to the bourgeois stratum of society:

"In capitalist countries, the working class has nothing to lose … in the colonial countries the working class has everything to lose; in reality it represents the fraction of the colonised nation which is necessary and irreplaceable if the colonial machine is to run smoothly …. It is these elements which constitute also the 'bourgeois' fraction of the colonised people."[20]

If not the working class, then to whom were the peasantry to turn for support? Fanon had an answer to this in the revolutionary potential he ascribed to the *lumpenproletariat*. However, Fanon's conception of this is at odds with a conventional Marxist understanding of this category, which in extreme conditions of crisis may become detached from their class and form a 'free-floating' stratum which is then particularly vulnerable to *reactionary* influences. For Fanon on the other hand, the *lumpenproletariat*,

"… once it is constituted, brings all its forces to endanger the 'security' of the town, and is the sign of the irrevocable decay, the gangrene ever present at the heart of colonial domination .... These classless idlers will by militant and decisive action discover the path that leads to nationhood."[21]

For Woddis, therefore, Fanon's approach to the question of class was not only contradictory but also unscientific; and this was particularly the case with regard to the importance Fanon placed on both the *peasantry* and the *lumpenproletariat*, who, as the leading revolutionary actors and through voluntary and autonomous action, would bring about a national revolution on behalf of the (nebulous) *people*. In this, the urban working class is allocated a minor role as "small islands of struggle within the fortress of colonialism";[22] although, Woddis says, Fanon does acknowledge that trade union power could play an important role during the "decisive phase of the of the fight for independence."[22]

The evidence above suggests that Fanon's views were closer to Maoism – as in "the image of a revolutionary process as the surrounding of the cities by the countryside"[23] – or even to that of Bakunin and the idea of the *revolutionary outlaw*, than to a conventional Marxist perspective. However, Fanon also maintained in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the connection between his theory of colonial identities and Marxism could not be reduced simply to a question of class struggle:

"You are rich because you are white. You are white because you are rich. This is why a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem."[24]

This can be illustrated with reference to another key Marxist category – *commodity fetishism*; that is, how under capitalism the social organisation of labour is mediated through commodity exchange. Through this, (subjective) *social* relationships (between people) involved in production are transformed into (objective) *economic* relations between things (money, commodities) which in turn obscure the true relations of production.

In *Capital* Volume 1, Marx drew parallels between commodity fetishism and religion:

"In order therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities."[25]

There are obviously major differences between religious and commodity fetishism, not least in the fact that commodities do have a real existence. However, what is important to note

here is that commodity fetishism can be made the basis for theories of alienation or reification. Utilising this further, Jaqueline Crowell[26] has drawn on parallels between *commodity* and *racial* fetishism and applied this to Fanon's work around colonial identity.

By *racial* fetishism is meant how biological and cultural categories replace the money-form, replicate the structure of monetised relations of capitalism and reflect the concrete reality of colonialism more closely than Marx's dialectics of class struggle. As Crowell states:

> "In the theories of Marx and Fanon, both theorists argue that the societies that they analyse each represent 'a world cut in two'. Marx argues that this is constituted by the conflict between the 'compartments' of the capitalist and the worker, whereas the tension between the coloniser and colonised native replace this class struggle within Fanon's colonial context. Because colonialism lacks the exchange relations of capitalism, Fanon's analysis adapts Marx's theory to colonialism by purporting that the colonial social relations assess value, not through the money-form, but instead, through the whiteness of one's skin."[27]

(Re-)Reading *Black Skin, White Masks*

It could be argued that the above reading of Fanon is flawed in that it also fails to recognise how (racial) oppression is inseparable from the material conditions from which it arises, and that this must necessarily include the class struggle as it pertains to the colonial situation – once again class relations are underdetermined in this reading. However, what is of value is the way this disarticulates the question of race from a purely economic context, opening it up to all forms of exploitation and therefore offering a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the structures that conceal oppression under colonialism.

This is particularly clear in *Black Skin, White Masks* with respect to Fanon's critique of Sartre's view that race can be collapsed into *class*. As Sartre puts it, "negritude appears as the minor term in a dialectical progression" and therefore the "subjective, existential, ethnic idea of *negritude* 'passes', as Hegel puts it, into the objective, positive, exact idea of *proletariat*."[28] Fanon on the other hand challenged this as downplaying the role of racial categories; and although he eventually became critical of negritude, there are also obvious connections between this philosophy and Marxism, not least in how it can inform Marxism as a global theory into oppression, embracing race, gender, class and capital, and underpinned by both *material* (socio-economic) and *non-material* (ideological) conditions – encompassing race and class, in other words.

This touches on one of the central methodological issues of Marxism (or of social sciences in general, for that matter) – how do you order the (often competing) empirical outcomes thrown up by the material conditions under investigation? and can any analysis of oppression in particular be undertaken independent of any one aspect, whether that be in relation to class, race or gender, for example?

(Re-)Reading *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*

Another area in which Fanon has often been heavily criticised is in relation to gender politics.[29] Much of this is justified and some of it has centred on the way that Fanon portrays Algerian women in the chapter 'Algeria Unveiled' in the above text. In this, Fanon's views on the veil are ambiguous, to say the least. For example, what is to be made of the following?

> "The woman, seen in her white veil unifies the perception one has of Algerian feminine society."[30]

and

> "With the veil, things become well-defined and ordered. The Algerian woman, in the eyes of the observer, is unmistakably 'she who hides behind the veil'."[31]

On the other hand, it could be argued that there is no ambiguity in Fanon's analysis on the role women played in the *Algerian revolution*, how their fight for liberation as *women* played a significant part in the struggle and whose role was:

> "... an authentic birth in a pure state, without preliminary instruction. There is no character to imitate. On the contrary, there is an intense dramatisation, a continuity between the woman and the revolutionary. The Algerian woman rises directly to the level of tragedy."[31]

From a Marxist-feminist perspective, therefore, engaging with Fanon is an opportunity to enrich our understanding on how gender politics plays out in a postcolonial context and in connecting the struggle for independence with the fight for justice and the end of patriarchy.

(Re-)Reading *The Wretched of the Earth*:

One aspect of this text that even Woddis was complimentary about was in relation to the national question:

> "He writes splendidly and with wide knowledge on the question of national culture and its influence on the national democratic revolution."[17]

Other Marxists have been more critical. Some have attacked Fanon for his *nationalism* whilst others have attacked his views on both national liberation and Marxism as being two sides of the same (Eurocentric) coin.[32] However, in various passages of his text Fanon does seem to be attuned to the specifics and positive aspects of precolonial social and cultural formations. This is particularly evident even in the chapter 'Concerning Violence' in which, as Neil Lazarus has said:

> "Fanon celebrates as profoundly democratic the 'traditional' protocols of public culture in Africa."[32]

Furthermore, in the essay *On National Culture* there is "a good deal of informed and appreciative discussion on the styles, themes, tonalities and registers of various pre-colonial cultural practices."[33]

The important point to make here is that, in drawing attention to *precolonial* modes of cultural production, Fanon is not arguing for a return to a distinctive precolonial past but instead is highlighting how the logic of colonialism *destroys* these pre-existing cultural practices, and internalises colonial practices in the colonised. But he is also pointing the way forward to how a *post-colonial* future might be organised around *socialist* lines:

> "The immobility to which the native is condemned can only be called in question if the native decides to put an end to the history of colonisation – the history of pillage –

and to bring into existence the history of the nation – the history of decolonisation."[34]

Crucial to Fanon's understanding of national culture is his outlining of this as being dynamic and responsive to historical change. In this, there can be no return to the past (real or imagined) nor can the development of a truly progressive national consciousness be left to a (Western-educated) elite. Fanon points to the problem of *neocolonialism* in the chapter 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness'.

Fanon's critical analysis of nationalism and (internalised) colonialism can therefore underpin radical pedagogical approaches in which the *community* is assigned a crucial role in the educational process and in the development of national consciousness, therefore challenging existing school systems based on hierarchies of differentiation and inequality:

"Both cultural action and cultural revolution imply communion between the leaders and the people, as subjects who are transforming reality."[35]

Conclusion

This article has attempted to tease out the *alternatives* available to us in Fanon's writings and to move our understanding of his work beyond the preconceived ideas and prejudices that have informed his legacy. However, this is far from being an easy task as his work is neither a doctrine – there is no such thing as Fanonism – nor is it presented to us in a systematic way. Any engagement with Fanon therefore requires a careful *reading* of his work as there are many Fanons contained within these texts.

My Fanon has also been based on a highly selective reading of his work and I hope that this selection has done some justice to the arguments I have attempted to set out in the article. However, a word of warning is required at this point – in constantly reinventing and reviving Fanon, we may be in danger of losing sight of his *usefulness*. If there can be a *postmodern* Fanon, a Fanon of *queer* theory, a *feminist* Fanon or even a *Marxist* Fanon then where do you draw the line? Why not a *finance-capital* Fanon?

What this article hopefully demonstrates, however, is that Fanon *can* be *read* in a *useful way*, in particular in a way that largely eschews the fetishisation of violence as applied to Fanon, initially by the New Left. This has tended to cloud debates and disagreements around the use of his work ever since, with the result that his ideas are still (mis)applied with tragic consequences.

These tasks are even more pressing considering the current situation of a world dominated by the market and globalisation, by commodification and financial speculation. More specifically, this domination manifests itself in the humanitarian crisis created by the West, in which the "wretched of the earth" are no longer far away in a remote part of the world and only made visible through the medium of television; they are encamped at Calais; they are sitting in a bedroom next door on the internet.

Lastly, and returning once again to my first encounter with Fanon all those years ago, I now realise in retrospect that this experience not only presented me with an academic challenge, but also a direct challenge to myself as *the other*; as a white/British/male/sexual being. Engaging fully with Fanon is therefore much more than a political challenge; it also presents challenges to all of us in terms of our ethnicity, nationality, culture, sexuality and gender.

Notes and References

1 F Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, Verso, London, 1998, p 1.
2 *Negritude* is a literary and ideological philosophy developed during the 1930s which promoted an all-embracing, global, African cultural practice in opposition to (French) colonialism – it included Marxism as an element of this (one of the leading advocates, Aimé Cesaire was a member of the French Communist Party, for example). Fanon was an advocate, then critic, of negritude but it continued to inform his work.
3 *Third Worldism* is used here in a generic way, as an over-arching term for anti-colonialism. However there is also a specific Maoist variant.
4 A C Alessandri, ed, *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 1999.
5 D Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Life*, Granta, London, 2000, p 479.
6 Fehrat Abbas was the first president of the Algerian provisional government, the GPRA, and was close to Fanon for a while.
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8 L R Gordon, T D Sharpley-Whiting and R T White, eds, *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Cambridge MA, 1998.
9 F Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Granada, London, 1968, p 67.
10 Alessandri, *op cit*, pp 1-2.
11 *Ibid*, p 77.
12 *Ibid*, pp 79-80.
13 P Naville, *Psychologie, Marxisme, Materialisme*, Marcel Riviere, Paris, 1948; quoted by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, *op cit*, p 75.
14 Rheda Malek was the general editor of *El Moudjahid*, the central organ of the FLN, which appeared between 1956 and 1962.
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16 J Woddis, *New Theories of Revolution: A commentary on Fanon, Debray, Marcuse*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1972, pp 25-6.
17 *Ibid*, p 27.
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19 Fanon, *Les Damnés*, *op cit*, p 32, quoted in Woddis, *op cit*, pp 40-1.
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26 J Crowell, *Marxism and Frantz Fanon's Theory of Colonial Identity: Parallels between racial and commodity-based fetishism*, Scientific Terrapin, Vol 3, Issue 1, University of Maryland, 2011.
27 *Ibid*, pp 1-2.
28 J-P Sartre, *Orphee Noir*, preface to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et malgache de langue française*, L P Senghor, ed, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1948, p 11; quoted in Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, *op cit*, p 94.
29 For example, see T D Sharpley-Whiting, *Anti-Black Femininity and Mixed-Race Identity: Engaging Fanon to reread Capecia*, in L R Gordon et al, *op cit*, pp 155-162.
30 F Fanon, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, Earthscan, London, 1989, p 36.
31 *Ibid*, p 50.
32 N Lazarus, *Disavowing Decolonisation*, in Alessandri, *op cit*, p 166.
33 *Ibid*, p 168.
34 *Ibid*, p 169.
35 P Freire, *Cultural Action For Freedom*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1972, p 83.

Syria today

How should we understand what is happening in Syria

by Nick Wright

Nick Wright

A PARTIAL AND rather unstable ceasefire, brokered by Russia and Turkey, but excluding the two principal insurgent formations – Isis and Jabhat al-Nusrah — is holding. This, despite the sabotage of the Damascus water supply and continued fighting in remoter areas, illustrates the widening consensus that armed resistance is now unlikely to succeed in dislodging the Assad government.

That foreign sponsorship was critical to the enduring nature of the insurgency is demonstrated by the failure of the opposition's regional sponsors – Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – to save it from defeat.

The ignominious end to Washington's strategy to remove the present Syrian government — and the higher priority it currently assigns to defeating Isis – means that something akin to realism now constrains US foreign policy in the region. With Turkey increasingly adrift from NATO's regional strategy — despite its membership of the imperialist alliance — the prospects for intervention aimed at regime change are much reduced.

The turning point was the decision by the Obama administration in August 2013 to hold back from bombing Syria. If posterity is to remember Ed Miliband it will be for his refusal to go along with the imperialist war party in Labour's parliamentary ranks and set the RAF against the Russian airforce.

This *de facto* acceptance that — with Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah support for Assad – the regional balance had shifted against the fundamentalist kleptocracies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar has closed off the long term chances of the armed insurgency to effect regime change.

That contradictions within the camp of imperialism find a reflection as much in the competing power centres of the Washington bureaucracy as in the Labour Party is a sign of just how widespread is the crisis of bourgeois policy and ideas.

It is unlikely that the final shape of the Middle East political map will be settled any time soon. In the medium term the biggest losers will include any elements that rely on US patronage. As always the Kurds will pay the price if, and when, the US dispenses with them in favour of restoring its intimacies with Turkey or any other regional player with a Kurdish minority.

The mainstream media narrative has Syria as a state with a *popular uprising* crushed by a reactionary regime while the Syrian government characterises this as a *terrorist* insurgency.

It is clearly more complex than either of these accounts will have it. The 'popular' character of the armed opposition was put to the test with the closing stages of the battle for Aleppo when a relative handful of jihadis and camp followers evacuated the city in a charabanc convoy to be relocated, perhaps temporarily, in one of the remaining oases of insurgency. Meanwhile many thousands more streamed away from their battle-scarred neighbourhoods to find food, shelter and medical aid from the regime, the Russians and Iranians.[1]

Our media, which for many months has relied exclusively on accounts by activist reporters embedded with the jihadis, or on an ambitiously titled one-man media stream located in a Coventry council house, has suddenly fallen silent.

The *Morning Star* – which described the end of the battle as a "liberation" for the city – was criticised by a cacophony of conventionally right-wing newspapers, Blairite MPs and liberal commentators.

The paper's editor, Ben Chacko, responded rather robustly:

> "As has been well documented by the *Morning Star* and other newspapers, the Syrian opposition is **dominated** *(my emphasis NW)* by violent extremist sects, most notably Isis and al-Qaida affiliates.
> "In East Aleppo these include Nour el-Din el-Zinki, which beheaded a 12-year-old boy earlier this year and posted a video of it online — as reported at the time in many British papers including the *Daily Mail.*"[2]

Ben Chacko pointed out that journalists were absent from east Aleppo for the simple reason that Syrian opposition organisations cannot be trusted not to kidnap or behead reporters. As a result, many newspapers were taking at face value statements from the very groups they cannot trust with the lives of their journalists.

The *Morning Star* statement insisted that "the capture of the eastern part of the city by government forces was preferable to its continued occupation by Islamist terrorists and was a step towards ending this terrible war". It was "an ongoing outrage which is claiming thousands of innocent lives."

The controversy around the *Morning Star* took a welcome turn when Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn – after he was attacked by Labour MPs for failing to condemn the offending article – said that although he disagreed with the term he would not stop buying the paper.

Some of the criticism directed at the *Morning Star's* use of the term "liberation" came from friends of the paper, from people more firmly rooted in the anti-imperialist left who have pointed out that, despite the turn events have taken, opposition to the Assad government was wider than the most terroristic of the insurgents and had, in its early stages, something of the character of a street movement linked to the Arab Spring.

In the spring of 2011 a series of street actions by opposition groups followed the arrest of a group of youngsters accused of graffiti protests in the southern city of Dara'a. The state's response was characteristically brutal. Syrian communists called for an investigation into the repressions and President Assad, on the back foot, proclaimed a programme of reforms and apologised for the killings. Supporters of the regime took to the streets in a series of counter rallies.

The peculiar feature of subsequent events is that opposition to the Assad regime has not translated directly into backing for the insurgent strategy and that the social base of the armed opposition has diminished. Increasingly, the insurgency's reliance on foreign backing became a source of weakness. The Syrian Communist Party (Unified) estimates that fighters from 80 nations are present among the jihadi groups.

It is clear that support for the territorial integrity and national independence of Syria is wider than the partisan electoral base of Assad and that this is reflected in the breadth of the opposition to the armed insurgency. This undoubtedly widened as the foreign sponsorship of the armed opposition, by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, by Turkey and more covertly by NATO powers became apparent.

Even so, in these circumstances, Assad can count on the support of a wide range of confessional groups, on secular forces and on very big sections of the Sunni population, especially in urban areas. In fact a large part of the Syrian Arab Army is Sunni and important Sunni elements in the national bourgeoisie have traditionally found more opportunities through an accommodation with the regime than in resistance to its secular nature.

This is not to discount the dangerous potential for sectarian impulses to undermine the prospects for a political settlement among Syrians. Assad does not have unconditional backing from the Russians. It is in Russia that some elements in the Muslim Brotherhood invest their hopes of restraining the regime.

The significant role of Iranian-backed Shia militias, which perhaps less virulently than Isis and Al-Nusra, mirror the sectarianism that infests the region, is a potential threat to a domestic rapprochement as were the excesses which, accompanied the defeat of the insurgency in Aleppo.

The negotiated evacuation of the jihadi rump from Aleppo is just the latest in a series of local agreements that have seen partial ceasefires and a cessation of fighting with some fighters given safe passage while others have reached local agreements that have resulted in the reintegration of communities into national life — sometimes with militants keeping their personal weapons.

The complexity of Syria's political development is illustrated by the contradictory aspects of its domestic and foreign policies. Some of the opposition to the Assad government was grounded in its turn to privatisation with its inevitable accompaniment of favouritism in awarding contracts and in corruption and an accommodation with foreign capital.

Western governments have pursued an on/off relationship with Syria, sometimes wooing it, sometimes trying to isolate it. And Assad has been similarly erratic in his choice of allies and enemies.

The ethnic, confessional, class and demographic complexity of Syria means that class contradictions within the society are refracted through a complex interplay of local and global factors. Solidarity with Syria in the present confrontation does not necessarily imply support for the Assad regime.

Hadash, the communist-led Arab-Jewish front in Israel, said that Aleppo's release,

> "from the hands of terrorist groups is a turning point … in the effort to thwart the imperialist and reactionary offensive on the people of the region.
> "The unification of Aleppo brings an end to the plans to divide Syria, and is a manifestation of the failure of the American, Turkish, Saudi and Qatari strategies, as well as of their inability to protect the terror groups that destroyed Syria and sowed terror among the civilians."

The Syrian Communist Party (Unified) — one of Syria's two communist parties which are divided over their respective attitudes to the regime — described the present situation as a struggle against the most extremist and fundamentalist radical movements of this century like al-Nusra Front, ISIS and al-Qaeda which have been condemned internationally.

This struggle is the practical embodiment of confrontation against the imperialist projects of domination in the world and in the region — the US drive to create the so-called "New Middle East."

The confusions which arise about the characterisation of the Syrian regime and the opposition lie in a failure to understand the imperatives which drive imperial policy in the region and the related failure to grasp that even regimes that are characterised by reactionary elements in their domestic policies nevertheless value national independence and sovereignty

When Lenin wrote that "Whoever expects a 'pure' social revolution will *never* live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is" he might have extended his aphorism to counter-revolution."[3]

In evaluating the nature of the insurgency against Syria's secular state, liberal interventionists, who clothe their foreign policy strategies in the language of human rights and women's emancipation, found themselves on the same side as the head-choppers of Isis and Al Qaeda.

Notes

1 https://21centurymanifesto.wordpress.com/2016/12/16/eyewitness-in-aleppo-today/
2 (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3697770/US-backed-Nour-al-Din-al-Zenki-behead-boy-accused-al-Quds-spy-Assad.html).
3 3 V I Lenin, *The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up*, in *Collected Works*, Vol 22, p 356.

The Anniversary of Lenin's *Imperialism*

by Lars Ulrik Thomsen

El hombre controlador del universo **Diego Rivera,** Mural at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City

"Monopolies, oligarchy, the striving for domination and not for freedom, the exploitation of an increasing number of small or weak nations by a handful of the richest or most powerful nations—all these have given birth to those distinctive characteristics of imperialism which compel us to define it as parasitic or decaying capitalism. More and more prominently there emerges, as one of the tendencies of imperialism, the creation of the 'rentier state', the usurer state, in which the bourgeoisie to an ever-increasing degree lives on the proceeds of capital exports and by 'clipping coupons'. It would be a mistake to believe that this tendency to decay precludes the rapid growth of capitalism. It does not. In the epoch of imperialism, certain branches of industry, certain strata of the bourgeoisie and certain countries betray, to a greater or lesser degree, now one and now another of these tendencies. On the whole, capitalism is growing far more rapidly than before; but this growth is not only becoming more and more uneven in general, its unevenness also manifests itself, in particular, in the decay of the countries which are richest in capital (Britain)."

V I Lenin

The place of imperialism in history

Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism

THE LABOUR movement is facing major challenges. The duration of the epoch of imperialism has evolved differently from that anticipated at the beginning of the 20th century. All this raises a number of key issues that can only be solved through a real definition of the epoch.

This article is divided into three parts: first, an analysis of our epoch; then a critique of Andrew Murray's article in *CR*81; and finally a comment on the opening of Murray's book *The Empire and Ukraine*, published by Manifesto Press in 2015.

The question of epoch definition is one of the most complicated for the labour movement to solve. In this context it is important to look at the definitions given in the classics. Lenin's article from 1913, *The Historical Destiny of the Doctrine of Karl Marx*, deals with the development of Marxism in the period of bourgeois revolutions of 1848 and for the time after the first Russian revolution. The article is interesting in a couple of ways. First of all, there is his description of history that alternates between evolution and revolution; it is as if history, after careful consideration, *gathers strength* for a new leap forward. Next, there is his epoch definition, and Lenin operates with three main epochs from 1848 to 1913:

> "The chief thing in the doctrine of Marx is that it brings out the historic role of the proletariat as the builder of socialist society. Has the course of events all over the world confirmed this doctrine since it was expounded by Marx?
> Marx first advanced it in 1844. The *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels, published in 1848, gave an integral and systematic exposition of this doctrine, an exposition which has remained the best to this day. Since then world history has clearly been divided into three main periods: (1) from the revolution of 1848 to the Paris Commune (1871); (2) from the Paris Commune to the Russian revolution (1905); (3) since the Russian revolution."[1]

If we transfer this epoch definition for the rest of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, what would it look like?

Lars Ulrik Thomsen

The First World War triggered the *October Revolution* in 1917, as the start of an immense intensification of the class struggle on an international scale that reached its peak in the Second World War in 1939. The rest of that century and the beginning of the present one have been characterised by extensive and barbaric wars, the result of the attempt of imperialism to turn back the wheel of history to colonial times.

What can we learn from the development that characterises the late 19th century and early 20th century? There is a qualitative change in the historical development of capitalism from free competition to imperialism. One cannot immediately transfer the epoch definition that Lenin used in the 19th and 20th centuries. This issue is treated Lenin's article *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* which, among other things, says:

> "The categorical requirement of Marxist theory in investigating any social question is that it be examined within *definite* historical limits, and, if it refers to a particular country (eg, the national programme for a given country), that account be taken of the specific features distinguishing that country from others in the same historical epoch."[2]

Overall, we can describe our epoch as the *epoch of imperialism* related to the economic formation of society, then split it into two parallel epoch-definitions, one for *socialism* and one for *capitalism*[3], each with several stages:

For capitalism:
1) 1900 – imperialism
2) 1929 – start of state monopoly capitalism (SMC) phase 1
3) 1945 – start of SMC phase 2
4) 1975 – start of SMC phase 3
5) 2008 – world economic crisis

For socialism:
1) 1917 – October revolution
2) 1928 – first 5-year plan
3) 1945 – victory over fascism
4) 1962 – first man in space
5) 1985 - new economic policy
6) 1991 – dissolution of the USSR

The two epochs were *dialectically interconnected* and, as a consequence of the economic, ideological and military competition, led to the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

In the new millennium the contradictions in imperialism are tightening, and imperialist wars threaten the existence of mankind, but the millennium also contains the seeds of a new revolutionary epoch, because imperialism is carrying its own contradiction, socialism, within it. In particular, the world economic world crisis that broke out in 2008 has changed the perspectives for imperialism.

Celebrating the centenary of Lenin's *Imperialism*

In his lively and well-written article in *CR*81, Andrew Murray[4] portrays, with many interesting historical facts, the political, economical and theoretical preconditions for Lenin's analysis of imperialism, as well as seeking to describe contemporary conditions. Unfortunately, in his depiction of Lenin's *Imperialism* as 50% Hilferding, 20% Hobson and the balance polemical dialectics, Murray gives a false picture of the work.[5]

As we know, Lenin spent several years preparing the pamphlet in Zurich, Paris and London. The studies included a wide range of factual information from bourgeois authors, which Lenin worked through on the basis of dialectical logic. And precisely *a further development of logic* was the foundation for being able to perform the analysis. This important part of Lenin's work is completely ignored by Murray, and thus we also lose the understanding of the laws of development of capitalism.

Murray is also ironical about the full title of the pamphlet, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, because by now imperialism has lasted for more than 100 years.[6] This is a misconception that is consistent with a simple epoch-view, which is not in line with modern requirements. It is more correct to consider imperialism as the overall depiction of the modern era, while dividing it as above into epochs determined by the specific material conditions.[7] Hence the subtitle *The Highest Stage of Capitalism* is fully appropriate, in our present era too, if it is understood as a description of the social formation.

The biggest problem in Murray's article is the

description of the current stage as *ultra-* or *super-imperialism*. Here his lack of further development of dialectics is clearly expressed. He doesn't rethink *dialectical logic* and its concepts and categories, but operates in the *same terms* as Lenin used in his analysis. This is a major weakness of the article.

The last part of Murray's article is devoted to an account of the political, economic and military situation in the present phase of imperialism. But when the laws of development are not satisfactorily clarified, then Murray's analysis becomes *eclectic and random*. He is missing an evolution of *the 5 points* that Lenin used in its definition. In my opinion we can use part of this definition, which must then be expanded with new items.

The bottom line, however, is that Murray relaunches the concept of *ultra-imperialism* and therefore gives a false picture of the present imperialist contradictions. As Fritz Kumpf has shown in his work on Lenin's analysis of imperialism, there is a difference between tendency and actual development.[8] Murray's approach risks appearing like a reconciliation with reformism, as if Kautsky was right in the dispute with Lenin about the policy of the Second International. But it was a focal point of Lenin's work in this epoch, that one should not seek reconciliation with imperialism, but fight it.

The question of the attitude towards imperialism is vital for the labour movement, especially after the economic crisis of 2008-9. If we are not able to define imperialism and capitalism in the right way, we will inevitably run into new defeats. The communist and labour movements are still struggling with the consequences of the epoch of imperialism. Before we can move to the next step, we have to settle our accounts.

The Empire and Ukraine

The same trend as above is evident in Murray's book *The Empire and Ukraine*. In his first chapter Murray takes Lenin's 1916 pamphlet as his starting point:

> "It is now one hundred since Lenin wrote his celebrated pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, as the First World War raged around him. He located imperialism in the developments which had transformed capitalism over the preceding generation. In particular, he listed five factors which he saw as defining the new epoch – the formation of finance capital, based on the increasing role of the banks; the development of monopolies in place of free competition in most key branches of industry; the export of capital from the metropolitan centres of capitalism to the colonies and other less developed markets; the division of the world market between these monopolies; and the division of the world itself into formal and informal empires under the hegemony of one other of the great powers. All this was oriented towards raising the rate of profit for capital investment beyond what traditional 'free enterprise' could now yield."[9]

No-one with their full senses would assert that these 5 points would be adequate for today´s imperialism. The question is how to develop a correct picture of the laws of development in imperialism today. Andrew Murray continues:

> "Of course, even at the time Lenin's short work could not encompass every nuance to be explored on so central an issue, and it might be said that his description of finance capital described the contemporary German economy better than the British. Clearly the relative weight to be given to the factors he placed at the centre of his analysis varied from one imperial power to another. The export of capital, for example, played a central part in British imperialism but a more limited one, in the formal sense at least, in the Russian Empire. Lenin's aim was sharply and deliberately focused on analysing the route to the war then burning all around. It is unlikely he intended it to be the last word on a subject as complex, challenging and changing as imperialism and world economy."[10]

Naturally there are differences between nations, but what Lenin was discovering was the laws of development in the economy of capitalism, and the contradictions arising between the different national interests. This is the main advantage of his work.

Criticising the apparent contradiction between the moribund and parasitic condition of imperialism, and its duration, Murray writes:

> "But there are important ways in which the title, however arrived at, was true to the work's essence. Lenin described imperialism as monopoly capitalism in a moribund and parasitic condition, incapable of self-renewal and, moreover, as having prepared all the economic ground for socialisation. Imperialism '... drags the capitalists, against their will and consciousness, into some sort of new social order, a transitional one from complete free competition to complete socialisation.' A final stage indeed. In fact capitalism has reconstituted itself several times on the basis of imperialism since Lenin wrote, with enduring common features to be sure, but radically enough to make the perception of it as 'moribund' a century ago clearly outdated."[10]

In this paragraph Murray is not loyal to the text of Lenin, because what he really wrote was that, despite *the moribund and parasitic condition*, capitalism could develop at high speed. In chapter VIII, Lenin explains the question:

> "Certainly, monopoly under capitalism can never completely, and for a very long period of time, eliminate competition in the world market (and this, by and by, is one of the reasons why the theory of ultra-imperialism is so absurd)."[11]

A new analysis

The question of *ultra-imperialism* is also evident here, and Andrew Murray explains his view on the subject in the following way:

> "Lenin had something to say about this concept in 1916. He observed that 'there is no doubt that the development is going in the direction of a single world trust that will swallow up all enterprises and states without exception'. Ever since, however, only his subsequent qualification that '… the development in this direction is proceeding under such stress, with such a tempo, with such contradiction, conflicts and convulsions … that before a single world trust will be reached, before the respective

national finance capitals will have formed a world union of 'ultra-imperialism', imperialism will inevitably explode, capitalism will turn into its opposite' has general been recalled.

Lenin's qualification seems unexceptionable given the time and circumstances he was writing in. Indeed, imperialism was 'exploding' all around him. However, nearly one hundred years on, we should equally attend to the original proposition that the logic of capital accumulation does indeed tend in the direction of ultra-imperialism."[12]

So our task is only to criticise Lenin's analysis, rather than *developing a new analysis of imperialism*, with the features of present-day capitalism. As the Germans say, that is *'Binsenweisheit'* (a platitude).

According to the changes in productive forces, there have been refinements in dialectics since Lenin's time, but this subject is absent in Andrew Murray's exposition. We cannot analyse imperialism without a further development in concepts and categories. Also, we need to consider the historical factor in the dialectics of concepts. As the Hungarian Marxist-Leninist philosopher Bela Fogarasi wrote:

"We have pointed out that the content of concepts changes, that its scope becomes broader and richer with the development of knowledge. We quoted Lenin's brilliant guidance relating to the fact that concepts also have their dialectics. The concrete expression of this idea is extremely important for the correct, logical, epistemological understanding of the concept. This expression, however, is at the same time associated with great difficulties, because there can be no doubt that constancy also belongs to the essence of the concept. If we deny the dialectics of concepts, the concept cannot reflect the movable reality. If we interpret the dialectical character of concepts in such a way that we deny their constant character, then the concept cannot capture the relatively stable elements of reality. The solution can only be that the *concept is both constant and changeable.* But this *general* statement is not enough. The task of logic is to determine the relationship of the constant and the variable in the concept. In other words, we need to distinguish the constant (admittedly the *relatively* constant) aspect and the historical aspect."[13]

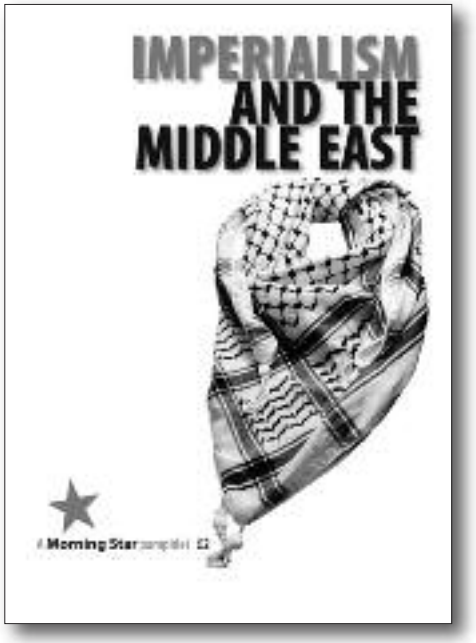
We may keep some of the essence of Lenin's five points, but with alterations according to the present conditions. This would indeed mean a further investigation in the present-day *dialectical logic*.[14]

Another vital part of an analysis should be the relationship between socialism and capitalism. In what way did the socialist world change capitalism/imperialism and develop new structures in *the political economy*? This is connected with the analysis of our epoch.

The success of any leap into a new era depends on the theoretical and political maturity of the communist parties and the labour movement, their level of organisation and internationalism This will once and for all mean the end of humanity's prehistory, and the beginning of a new and higher social order.

Notes and references:

1 V I Lenin, *The Historical Destiny of the Doctrine of Karl Marx*, in *Lenin, Collected Works (LCW),* Vol 18, pp 582-5.
2 V I Lenin, *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, Section 2, 'The historically concrete presentation of the question', in *LCW*, Vol 20, pp 400-1.
3 G Binus, B Landefeld and A Wehr, *State Monopoly Capitalism*, Part 3, in *CR*80, Summer 2016, p 9.
4 A Murray, *One Hundred Years of Lenin's 'Imperialism'*, in *CR*81, Autumn 2016, pp 2-9.
5 *Ibid*, p 5.
6 *Ibid*, p 7.
7 W-D Gudopp von Behm, *Das Mass der Epoche (The Measure of the Epoch)*, Wissenschaft und Sozialismus,1995,
8 F Kumpf, *Probleme der Dialektik in Lenins Imperialismus-analyse (Problems of Dialectics in Lenin's Analysis of Imperialism)*, VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, Berlin 1968, Ch 3, p 164ff, and especially p 172ff.p 6f.
9 A Murray, *The Empire and Ukraine*, Manifesto Press, 2015, p 7.
10 *Ibid*, p 8.
11 V I Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Ch VIII: 'Parasitism and Decay of Capitalism', in *LCW*, Vol 22, p 276.
12 Murray, *The Empire and Ukraine, op cit*, p 16.
13 B Fogarasi, *Dialektische Logik (Dialectical Logic)*, Aufbau-Verlag, Berlin, 1955, p 157.
14 L U Thomsen, *Lenin's Analysis of Imperialism – a Pioneering Work*, in *CR*58, Autumn 2010, pp 12-15.



Imperialism and the Middle East examines the background to the current crisis in the Middle East and the challenges this poses for the Left and highlights the importance of securing a sovereign Palestinian State with full powers as required by UN resolution.

It also argues that the political use of Islam, in terms of religious fundamentalism, has been a relatively new development, that the Middle East has a strong tradition of secular and socialist politics and that the rise of religious fundamentalism has been closely linked to the reactionary agendas of the regional allies of imperialism.

The pamphlet is based on contributions to the seminar organised in 2015 by the Coordinating Committee for Communist Parties in Britain and has been developed and updated with the cooperation of the International Commission of the Communist Party.

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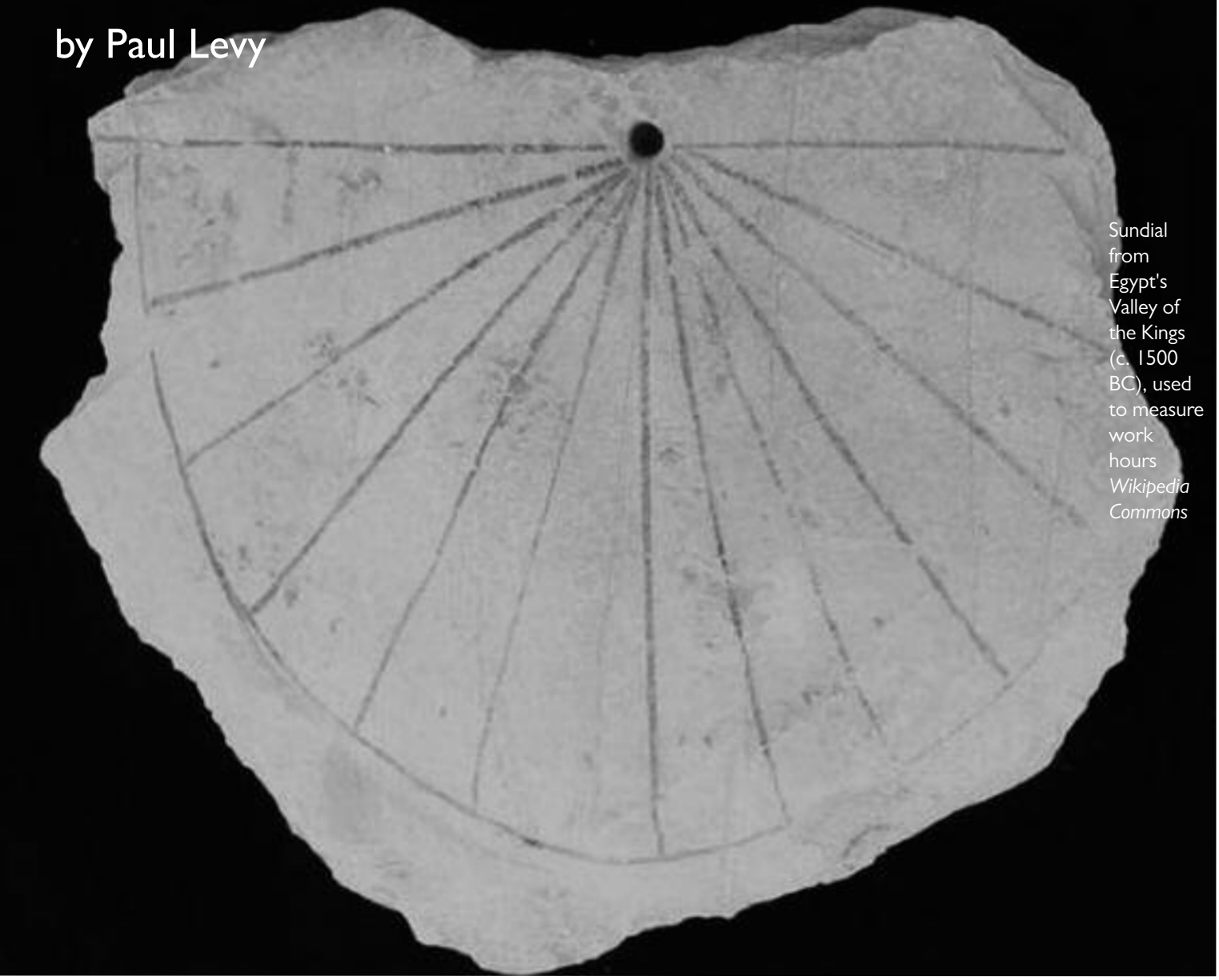
EXTENDED CRITIQUE

Space, Time – and Dialectics, Part 3

Comments on Unger's and Smolin's philosophies of mathematics

by Paul Levy



Sundial from Egypt's Valley of the Kings (c. 1500 BC), used to measure work hours *Wikipedia Commons*

In Part 1[1] of this extended critique of Unger and Smolin's book, Martin Levy argued that the key issues go to the very foundations of dialectical materialism – whether time is real or an illusion; whether there are many universes or just one; and the place of mathematics in nature and its representation. Part 2[2] dealt critically with the philosopher Unger's approach to the first two issues; while the same areas for the cosmologist Smolin will be covered in Part 4, scheduled for *CR*83. Here I want to look at the views of the two authors on the third area, mathematics.

"The history of mathematics throws up many examples of mathematical assertions, with proofs accepted in their day, which had to be revised or revisited under critical scrutiny."

The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time
By Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Lee Smolin
[Cambridge University Press, 2015, 564 pp, hbk, £19.99. ISBN 978-1-107-07406-4]

Paul Levy

Unger and Smolin each devote a chapter to the nature of mathematics and its relationship to the natural sciences. Both authors refute the idea of mathematics as a privileged source of insight about the Universe in its entirety. While Unger wisely and skilfully avoids engaging with "the technical disputes of the contemporary philosophy of mathematics", Smolin shows no such reticence. Although Smolin is correct to attack the philosophy of mathematics most common among physicists, his proposed alternative is unconvincing.

Platonism, Logicism, Intuitionism and Formalism

For most of human history, the mainstream philosophy of mathematics (long indistinguishable from philosophy as a whole) was Platonist. An example may help to explain this. The fact that a circle of radius 1 has area equal to π can be proved in several different ways. Why is it that two different people, using totally different (correct) arguments, will nevertheless always arrive at the same value for this area? Why doesn't there exist some argument which would establish that the area is 2, or 1,000,000? It seems absurd to think that this might be possible, but only because we take the consistency of mathematics as a given. For mathematical Platonists, this consistency arises because mathematical objects exist independently of human society. To Plato, the unit circle existed in the world of ideal forms. To St Augustine, the positive integers existed (and will always exist) in the mind of God. This Platonism, in various slightly modified forms, was the philosophy of nearly all European mathematicians prior to the 19th century.[3]

In the 19th century, two revolutionary developments in geometry critically undermined mathematical Platonism. These developments were: firstly, the invention by János Bolyai and Nikolai Lobachevksy of non-Euclidean geometry[4]; secondly, the invention of space-filling curves[5] (Giuseppe Peano) and continuous, nowhere-differentiable curves[6] (Karl Weierstrass). The effect of these discoveries was cataclysmic. Since time immemorial, geometers had believed that our (Euclidean) conception of space was the uniquely correct one. Our intuition about space was reliable because we were perceiving a real, singular realm of mathematical objects. Now Bolyai, Lobachevsky and Beltrami's[7] work overthrew the uniqueness of Euclidean geometry; Peano and Weierstrass showed that our geometric intuition was fallible. According to Reuben Hersh:

> "The situation was intolerable. Geometry served from the time of Plato as proof that certainty is possible in human knowledge .... Loss of certainty in geometry threatened loss of all certainty."[8]

In the first few decades of the 20th century, three philosophical schools attempted to re-establish certainty in mathematics, all proposing new 'foundations' on which mathematics should be built. The first was logicism, which set out to save Platonism by reducing mathematics to logic and establishing that all of mathematics is contained in axiomatic set theory. The school, whose principal exponents were Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, collapsed under the weight of its own paradoxes. As Frege was about to print volume 2 of his *Die Grundgesetze der Arithmetik (The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*) in 1902, he received a letter from Russell, alerting him to an antinomy (ie a statement which was both true and false in his axiom system), now known as Russell's paradox.[9] By elementary logic, a single paradox renders the entire system invalid, or *inconsistent* in logical terminology. In one blow, the certainty which Frege hoped to establish had been destroyed.[10] Although Frege and Russell attempted to rescue the approach, doing so only led them to introduce more and more complicated structures. Mathematical foundations could not be constructed on such unstable ground.

The second school was (mathematical) intuitionism, founded by the Dutch topologist L E J Brouwer. Following Kant, intuitionists held that mathematics is mentally constructed and is not founded in our interaction with the physical world. Brouwer recognised that mathematical developments had produced a crisis for Kant's theory of knowledge, since our geometric intuition (categorised as *synthetic a priori* knowledge by Kant) is Euclidean and so could no longer be justified as an inherent property of nature. Brouwer set out to rescue intuitionism "by abandoning Kant's apriority of space but adhering the more resolutely to the apriority of time."[11]

The most mathematically radical of the school's tenets was its rejection of the use (at least in general) of the law of *excluded middle*, that any statement is either true or false.[12] If this rejection were put into practice, then most of classical mathematics would have to be declared invalid. Mathematicians reacted with dismay. As Hermann Weyl said,

> "[T]he mathematician watches with pain the larger part of his towering edifice which he believed to be built of concrete blocks dissolved into mist before his eyes."[13]

Intuitionism shared with the other two schools a blindness to the actual practice of mathematics. But, far more than its competitors, it sought to tie mathematicians' hands behind their backs. Consequently, it never gained more than a handful of followers.

The movement which has had the most enduring effect on (pure) mathematical culture was formalism, led by David Hilbert. According to this school, all of mathematics should be reduced to a series of abstract symbols which can be manipulated according to an agreed list of rules. The only difficulty would be to find the correct rules. Hilbert hoped that this reduction to formal axiomatic systems (historical precursors to machine code) would produce certainty in mathematics, although there was a heavy price to pay: in this setting mathematics becomes "a meaningless game".[14] Only the moves exist. Heuristics, pictures, conjectures, mistakes, examples, applications, and many other features of the rich *human* history of mathematics are sacrificed.

Gödel's incompleteness theorems in 1936 dealt a fatal blow to (this part of) Hilbert's programme. Roughly speaking, Gödel's second incompleteness theorem says that one can never know if a formal axiomatic system containing arithmetic is consistent. Nevertheless, the influence of formalism on mathematical pedagogy continues to the present day.

To most working mathematicians, the debate on foundations ended with Gödel. The 'correct' foundations proved to be elusive or non-existent, and yet mathematics still thrives. Some mathematicians (often those with corresponding religious beliefs[15]) describe themselves as Platonists. A greater number, but still surely not a majority, call themselves formalists. Generally, agnosticism rules.[16] In the words of Jean Dieudonné, the spokesman for Nicolas Bourbaki[17],

> "[W]e believe in the reality of mathematics, but of course when philosophers attack us with their paradoxes we rush to hide behind formalism and say, 'Mathematics is just a combination of meaningless symbols.'"[18]

Most pure mathematicians are aware of the untenability of mathematical Platonism and its opposites, although they do not dare to venture an alternative.

Mathematics and Natural Science

It seems that the same cannot be said of our closest cousins. A short 1960 paper, *The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences*[19] by the Nobel prize-winning physicist Eugene Wigner, has become extremely well known (if not so well read). Whatever Wigner's intention, the paper has provided nourishment for mathematical Platonism, especially among physicists. Wigner argued that "there is no rational explanation" for the range and diversity of applications of mathematics in the natural sciences.

The most striking weakness of Wigner's paper is its misrepresentation of mathematics, especially the motivations guiding its development. In answer to the question "What is mathematics?", Wigner posits that it is "the science of skilful operations with concepts and rules invented just for this purpose". On the basis of this myth, Wigner hints at a theology.

Were the counting numbers invented so that mathematicians could enjoy mental arithmetic? Wigner admits that they were invented for counting things, but claims that more advanced mathematical concepts are "so devised that they are apt subjects on which the mathematician can demonstrate his ingenuity and sense of formal beauty". The essence of Wigner's argument is his exaggeration of aesthetics as a factor in the development of mathematical theory, and his diminution of utility (or his separation of mathematical utility from scientific utility) in the same regard.

Wigner undermines his own thesis with his introductory example, the appearance of the square root of π in the formula describing the number of customers arriving at a shoe shop each day. The formula is the probability density function for the *normal distribution*, sometimes known as the *Bell curve*. It is difficult to think of an area of mathematics with a greater orientation towards the natural world than probability theory. If the appearance of π is a mystery here, then the mystery lies in the mathematics itself and not in its application to nature.

Modern physics has thrown up even more radical Platonist views. A 2014 popular science book[20] by Max Tegmark, a Swedish-American cosmologist, speculated that the universe is a mathematical system. These inane pontifications appear to have been taken seriously by some physicists and scientific journalists (but not, it would appear, by any mathematicians).

One side-effect of the Frege-Brouwer-Hilbert quest for mathematical foundations was the accelerated separation of the disciplines of mathematics and physics. This trend, somewhat noticeable by the 18th century, had further developed in the 19th century, as a new category of *pure* mathematicians was installed in universities in Germany and (to a somewhat lesser extent) England. The pervasive influence of formalism in mathematics teaching, especially via Bourbaki, made the separation permanent.[21]

Mathematical theories are often (though not always) delivered at the scientist's door in their packaging, with all traces of the manufacturing process effaced. Conventional modes of presentation of mathematics obscure the historical origins, controversies and uncertainties which stimulated its development.[22] Mysticism about the usefulness of mathematics in the natural sciences is at least in part a consequence of the ignorance which follows from this form of presentation. Devoid of context, any relationship of mathematics to the physical universe seems to be a miracle.[23]

Smolin and Unger both attempt to engage with the question of what mathematics is, as part of their argument that mathematics cannot provide a short cut to understanding the universe. Both authors invoke, and reject, the choice between discovery and invention views of mathematics.[24] This is a reference to the history outlined above. The Platonists view mathematics as discovery, while the formalists view it as invention. The Platonists cannot explain how we perceive mathematical objects which have no physical form; the formalists cannot explain why mathematics turns out to be useful (or interesting).

Unger

According to Unger, mathematics is the study of "the most general relations among parts of the world: structured wholes and bundles of relations", embodied in "a visionary simulacrum of this one real world", "the world without time or particularity". Although mathematics sometimes studies phenomena which take place in time, it does so via systems which themselves exist outside time. For example, in a model of planetary motion (such as that studied by Kepler), the

planets move as time progresses, but their movement is specified independently of time. The laws themselves are timeless.

Unger's description of "the war that mathematics wages against time" has an ironic precursor in Brouwer, who argued that mathematical intuition was (or at least should be) founded on time perception. Nevertheless, Unger's "war" explains the seductive hold that Platonism has long had on the mathematical mindset.

Unger persuasively argues that the power of mathematics in the natural sciences derives from three key characteristics: explication ("the working out of what is implied"); recursive reasoning (*ie* taking itself for its own subject matter); and fertility in the making of equivalent propositions. His view of mathematics is "naturalistic", but faint echoes of Brouwer's dogmatism can occasionally be heard. For example, we read that "mathematics … fails to do justice to the continuum" because of its "origins in counting". Really?

Mathematics first discovered the insufficiency of the counting numbers to account for space in the 5th century BCE, when a member of the Pythagorean sect[25] proved that the square-root of 2 cannot be expressed as a fraction. The insufficiency of the *algebraic* numbers (such as the square root of 2) was essentially conjectured by Euler in the 18th century, and established by Liouville in 1851. This was the setting in which Richard Dedekind constructed all real numbers by *cuts*[26], much derided by Unger. Thus, *Dedekind cuts* (and, as a consequence, great advances in the understanding of notions such as *denseness* and *completeness*) arose out of the contradiction between our notions of space as a continuum and of numbers as discrete entities. Unger sees this tension as an insuperable obstacle, rather than a catalyst for scientific progress.

Unger praises 19th century mathematics' "taming of the infinite" but rejects the use of the infinite in the natural sciences. This part of his analysis is confused. The development of mathematical notions of infinity belonged largely to set theory, where it is not a number but is a cardinality (in fact, infinitely many such), *ie* a measure of the size of a set. This is not comparable with the idea that a parameter or variable can have infinite value, as would be the case with "the inference of an infinite initial singularity from the field equations of general relativity". Such an inference is strictly outlawed in mathematics.

On the same point, Unger says that "there is an infinite difference between … indefinite longevity and eternity, which is infinity in time", that "no natural event … could jump the gap between indefinite longevity and eternity", and he therefore deduces that "the infinite could exist only if it always existed". It seems that Unger wants to conclude that the universe must have had a beginning and must necessarily have an end. Unpacking the argument, it is merely a restatement of Unger's "first cosmological fallacy", which rules that any attempt at a single model of the whole universe is invalid. By the same token, Unger's conclusion cannot apply to the universe in its entirety either.

Smolin

Smolin's main contentions concerning mathematics are that:

1. mathematical objects exist, but only after their creation (which he calls "evocation") by humans, from which point onwards their properties are fixed and incontrovertible (even if not yet discovered); and

2. the effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences is unsurprising given its origin in our study of the natural world.

The persuasive power of Smolin's argument on the second point will be conditioned on his ability to pose a coherent argument with respect to the first. But his intervention on the first point is clumsy. It is unclear how the notion of "evocation" might resolve the discovery vs invention debate. Although he presents his position as a third way between Platonism and formalism, his philosophical position is largely an echo of Hilbert. His first example is even a game, with "a set of possible plays of the game which the rules allow". Unlike Hilbert, Smolin believes that the game has meaning. But this is incompatible with his ontology, however vaguely it might be expressed.

To the Platonists, mathematical objects already exist (and always will do): we *discover* their properties through our faculties of reason (mathematical proof). To the formalists, nothing exists except sequences of formal manipulations: a proof is an *invention*, since it is just a manipulation of the symbols, reaching a certain end.

To Smolin, mathematical objects exist, but only once they are evoked (he means invented). Once they are invented, then all facts about them instantly and forever afterwards ("independent of time") become true (evoked into existence), and for formal axiomatic systems these are exactly the statements that follow by the allowed rules.

Leaving aside the confusion caused by Smolin's inconsistent use of "evocation", he has forgotten his professed principle that "time is real": he asserts that mathematical objects are time-bound in the sense that they have not always existed, but once evoked, *they will always exist, exactly as they do now.* Since he neglects the human aspect of mathematics, he has forgotten that its objects also undergo change (even a circle is not the same now as it was for the Pythagoreans[27]).

The greatest problem with Smolin's analysis is his near identification of mathematics with deduction from axioms, and his description of proof as "rational argument leading to unambiguous conclusions". Quite apart from the obvious objections such as Russell's paradox, an analysis of how mathematics is actually practised reveals the inaccuracy of this description.

The history of mathematics throws up many examples of mathematical assertions, with proofs accepted in their day, which had to be revised or revisited under critical scrutiny. Imre Lakatos vividly explored one striking example, Euler's famous formula concerning polyhedra.[28] According to the conventional presentation of the subject, Euler established the formula for convex polyhedra. As Lakatos demonstrated, this is simply not true. Euler announced his proof in 1751 for *all* polyhedra. Despite being one of the greatest mathematicians of the 18th century, Euler had made hidden assumptions in his proof. This mistake was not simply a case of human error. It, and the ensuing controversy, arose because the ideas required for understanding the problem had not yet been worked out. Debate about the formula – the "proofs and refutations" of the title of Lakatos's book – continued for over a century. The contradiction was resolved by the development of the theory of topology.

Was Euler "arguing rationally" when he announced an incorrect proof of the formula, or was rationality the preserve of those (with names now largely forgotten) who quite correctly pointed out counter-examples? This back-and-forth of proof and counter-example, belief and disbelief, makes no sense in Smolin's world, where proofs are "instances of rational argument applied to formal axiomatic systems to deduce true

properties of them".

Smolin, like almost all mathematicians and physicists (Platonist or not), makes the mistake of confusing mathematics with its formal presentation. One side-effect is to perpetuate the notion of mathematics as static and timeless (even if, for Smolin, this timelessness only proceeds in the forwards direction). Although the philosophy of mathematics is certainly a niche subject[29], non-specialists will be able to understand that a conception of mathematics as akin to the mere repetition of machine code makes for bad pedagogy (not to mention bad philosophy).

Mathematical Philosophy and Marxism

What would a Marxist philosophy of mathematics look like? Bearing in mind the specialism of this subject matter, I will not linger for too long on this question. I believe that the key to overcoming the impasse which mainstream philosophy of mathematics has fallen into can be found in Hersh's "front and back": the dogmatic Frege-Brouwer-Hilbert obsession with foundations arises from worshipping the front, and neglecting the back, of mathematics. Taking account of the full range of mathematical activity makes it easier to appreciate its processes of change, and reveals that the (empirically observed) consistency of mathematics is *methodological* rather than God-given.

Some (non-Marxist) philosophers of mathematics have already attempted to divert the narrative away from the dogma associated with the formal presentation of mathematics.[30] The implications for pedagogy of such a break with tradition have been much explored, especially in the work of George Pólya on problem solving.[31] In schools, colleges and universities, a more rounded and fulfilling experience could be created if the current focus on the mere assimilation of the knowledge of others were supplemented by experiences of autonomous investigation and reflection. It is beyond the scope of this article (and beyond the expertise of this author) to explore the history of such approaches in the socialist and capitalist worlds, but it is worth pointing out that mathematics was one of the most successful scientific disciplines in the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries, and that experiments with new pedagogical approaches were a key factor in this success.

Conclusions

Unger and Smolin are correct to identify mathematical Platonism as a philosophical error which can lead to the tail of mathematics wagging the dog of science. This is a pernicious danger for all natural and social sciences (the most obvious example of the latter being economics, as pointed out by Unger). Considerations of the nature of mathematics therefore have deep political ramifications, despite the esoteric subject matter.

While both authors deserve credit for attempting to tackle Platonist dogma, their contributions to the debate are unequal. Unger provides fresh insights, especially on the usefulness of mathematics in the natural sciences. In this regard, it is no surprise that his analysis is strongest when it is most closely connected with the (historical and contemporary) practice of mathematics. The major shortfall in Smolin's approach is his failure to grasp the essential nature of mathematics as a product of human activity, subject to change and revision. As a consequence, his arguments are unlikely to convince many physicists or other scientists already imbued with the conventional mindset concerning mathematics.

Notes and References

1 M Levy, *CR*80, Summer 2016, pp 22-25.
2 M Levy, *CR*81, Autumn 2016, pp 24-29.
3 Often this Platonism is expressed by the belief that the structure of the cosmos can be reduced to mathematics, *eg* Galileo: "the universe... is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures", *Il Saggiatore (The Assayer)*, 1623.
4 In Euclidean geometry the distance between two parallel straight lines is constant. One example of non-Euclidean geometry is given by a sphere or globe with opposite points identified. The analogues of straight lines (called geodesics) are the 'great circles', including the lines of latitude (but not longitude, except for the equator). Two lines of latitude are parallel, but they meet at the poles. This is an example of 'elliptic' geometry, meaning that geodesics curve towards each other; in 'hyperbolic' geometry, geodesics curve away from each other.
5 A curve which passes arbitrarily close to any point in space.
6 Roughly speaking, a continuous curve is one which can be drawn without lifting the pen from the paper; a differentiable curve is one which has no jagged edges (as at the corner of a square). Weierstrass constructed continuous curves with a jagged edge *at every* point. Weierstrass's and Peano's examples are 'monsters', or pathological examples which horribly subvert the intended meaning. Mathematical definitions, once made, take on a life of their own.
7 Eugenio Beltrami proved that Euclidean geometry is logically consistent if and only if the same is true of hyperbolic geometry.
8 R Hersh, *What is Mathematics, Really?*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p 137.
9 Russell's paradox arises from the question: Let X be the set of all sets which are not members of themselves; then is X a member of itself? There is no possible answer: if X is a member of itself then by definition it cannot be a member of itself, and vice-versa. To overcome this and various other paradoxes in set theory, the notion of *membership* had to be modified.
10 It is difficult not to feel some sympathy when reading Frege's last-minute footnote: "Hardly anything more unfortunate can befall a scientific writer than to have one of the foundations of his edifice shaken after the work is finished. This was the position I was placed in by a letter of Mr Bertrand Russell, just when the printing of this volume was nearing its completion."
11 L E J Brouwer, *Inaugural Address at the University of Amsterdam,* October 14, 1912.
12 Brouwer espoused instead that some statements are *undecidable*. Both the law of the excluded middle and Brouwer's alternative seem reasonable in some contexts but not in others. The law is equivalent to the *axiom of choice*, which permits an infinite number of choices to be made simultaneously. This is commonly summarised in terms of shoes and socks: anyone can choose one shoe from each of an infinite number of pairs of shoes (*eg* choose the left ones), but we need the axiom of choice to choose one sock from an infinite number of pairs of socks (assuming left and right socks are indistinguishable). Rejection of the law entails the refusal to accept that every real number is either positive, negative or zero.
13 H Weyl, *Philosophy of Mathematics and Natural Science*, Princeton University Press, 1949, Ch 2, §9 (p 54 of 2009 republication). Nevertheless, Weyl remarked in the same paragraph that "Mathematics with Brouwer gains its highest intuitive clarity". It is reported that Hilbert founded formalism in alarm that Weyl, his favourite student, was flirting with intuitionism.
14 Hersh, *op. cit*, p 7.
15 For example, Martin Gardner, figurehead of recreational mathematics and avid defender of mathematical Platonism, was a self-described "philosophical theist".
16 Of course, this agnosticism has repercussions. A previous generation of mathematicians, especially Bourbaki (*qv*), followed in the footsteps of the logicist and formalist schools by emphasising axiomatic set theory as the basis of all mathematics. Many of the current generation of

mathematicians have uncritically imbibed the identification of mathematics with its symbols. Students who ask the meaning of the symbols are unlikely to receive satisfactory answers.

17 Nicolas Bourbaki was the collective pseudonym for a group of (mostly French) mathematicians from 1934 onwards. Bourbaki undertook to publish a grand text, the *Eléments de Mathématique* series, which would establish a unified framework for mathematics along lines set out by Hilbert. Bourbaki became highly influential in pure mathematics, especially in algebra and analysis. As a practical side-effect, the notation and terminology in pure mathematics now differs substantially from that in physics, hampering communication between the disciplines.

18 J Dieudonné, *The Work of Nicholas Bourbaki*, in *American Mathematical Monthly*, Vol 77, 1970, p 134.

19 E P Wigner, in *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics*, Vol 13, No 1, 1960, pp 1-14.

20 M Tegmark, *Our Mathematical Universe: My quest for the ultimate nature of reality*, Knopf, 2014.

21 See Freeman J Dyson, *Gibbs Lecture*: *Missed Opportunities,* in *Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society*, Vol 78, No 5, 1972, p 635: "The marriage between mathematics and physics, which was so enormously fruitful in past centuries, has recently ended in divorce."

22 Hersh (in *op cit)* says that "mathematics has a front and back", comparable to any other profession: the front is what the public sees; the back is the real day-to-day practice. He credits the notion of front and back to the sociologist Erving Goffman.

23 Engels made a similar observation in *Anti-Dühring*, Part I, Ch III: "Like all other sciences, mathematics arose out of the needs of men: from the measurement of land and the content of vessels, from the computation of time and from mechanics. But, as in every department of thought, at a certain stage of development the laws, which were abstracted from the real world, became divorced from the real world, and are set up against it as something independent, as laws coming from outside, to which the world has to conform. That is how things happened in society and in the state, and in this way, and not otherwise, pure mathematics was subsequently applied to the world, although it borrowed from this same world and represents only one part of its forms of interconnection – and it is only just because of this that it can be applied at all." In K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 25, p 37.

24 Borrowed from Barry Mazur, *Mathematical Platonism and its Opposites*, in *European Mathematical Society Newsletter*, No 68, 2008, pp 19-21.

25 Possibly Hippasus of Metapontum. According to legend, the Pythagoreans, horrified by his discovery, drowned him at sea.

26 Roughly speaking, a *Dedekind cut* defines a real number in terms of two sets: the rational numbers, *ie* fractions, which are less than it; and the rational numbers which are greater than it. Subject to certain properties, we can reverse the process to obtain a real number for each pair of sets. It seems plausible that Unger's negative opinion of Dedekind cuts indicates sympathy with Brouwer, for whom such a construction was impermissible.

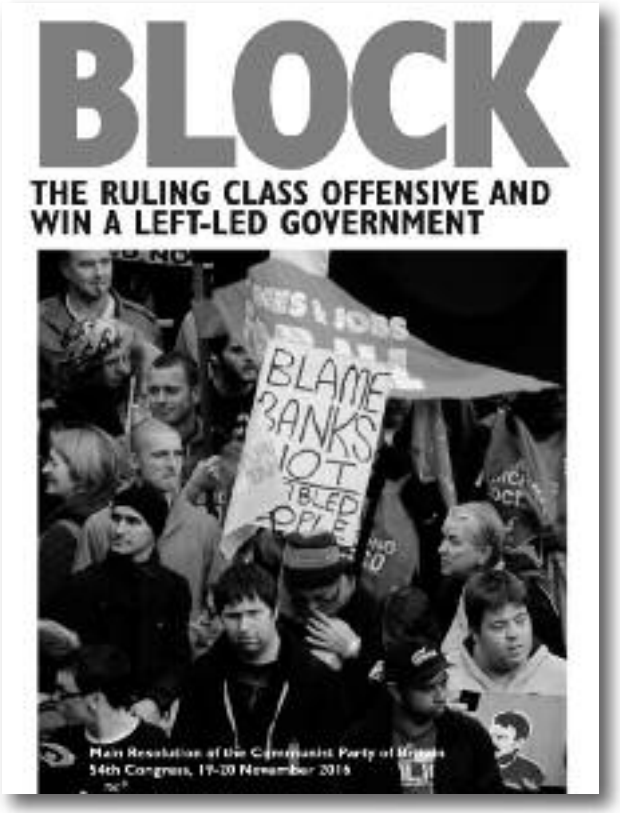
27 Every mathematical concept has both formal and informal content. The definition of a circle in Euclid's *Elements* implicitly requires a notion of distance which is itself left undefined. Most mathematicians would argue that the *meaning* of a circle has not changed since Euclid, but this can only be asserted if (among other things) one identifies Euclid's informal understanding of distance with the modern formal definition (of the Euclidean metric on the plane).

28 I Lakatos, *Proofs and Refutations*, Cambridge University Press, 1976. Euler's formula says that for a polyhedron (such as a cube), *ie* a solid body with *F* polygonal faces, *E* edges and *V* vertices, one always has *V-E+F=2*. The formula is now known to hold for a body which is connected (all of one piece) and simply-connected (has no tunnels), assuming the definitions of "face" etc are precise enough.

29 There were 1,931 UK mathematicians, including applied mathematicians and statisticians, submitted to the 2014 Research Excellence Framework. The philosophy of statistics is largely distinct from the philosophy of mathematics.

30 Lakatos was a member of the Workers' Party of Hungary in his youth after the Second World War, before his imprisonment in 1950 and subsequent disillusionment. He fled to the West in 1956. His philosophy is nonetheless influenced by Engels. Reuben Hersh's "humanist" view of mathematics contains many features which will be agreeable to Marxists, and his general outlook seems to be progressive and anti-war. His analysis seems to be influenced by postmodernism. From a uniquely Marxist perspective, it could be argued that the contradiction between the intensely private nature of mathematical thinking and its public communication is one of the main factors driving the development of the field.

31 *eg* G Pólya, *How to Solve It: A new aspect of mathematical method*, Princeton University Press, 1945.



Capitalism, because of its drive for private profit, cannot meet the needs of working people. Socialism based on working class political power is the only solution to capitalist crisis. The Communist Party works to achieve this goal .

It is the role of the Communist Party to bring to the working class and its allies a vision of an alternative society, a socialist society, by taking into account our own country's history and conditions.

The Communist Party and its programme frame a Marxist analysis of the crisis of capitalism and the role of imperialism in the world and point out the urgent need to lift people out of poverty, to protect hard won gains and to protect our planet's ecosystem.

As a condition of its own existence, the Party strives to provide ideological clarity in analysing the economic situation and giving clear leadership to the movement on the nature of the capitalist crisis.

Download the analysis developed by the Communist Party at its national congress in November 2016 here:

https://issuu.com/communist_party/docs/block_the_ruling_class_offensive

SOUL FOOD

by Mike Quille

New Boots and Pantisocracies

THERE HAVE been three momentous elections in Britain recently. The Scottish referendum, the last general election, and the recent EU referendum have all exposed deep, class-based fractures in the electorate, and been occasions for inchoate but forceful revolts against the corporate and political elites who dominate Britain.

More recently, the election of Donald Trump as president of the US is an even clearer sign of the revolt of working class people against forces whose ugly names – deindustrialisation, financialisation, globalisation – well express their ugly effects on individuals, communities and nations. The damage done to working people in the US is brilliantly expressed by poets of the calibre of Fred Voss, whose poetry we have presented before in Soul Food.

Poets in Britain, too, have reacted to recent seismic electoral shifts. Back in 2015, an experiment was mounted to chart the responses of these unacknowledged legislators of our culture and country to social and political changes. A poem a day was published online, and then more recently they were edited into a book of 100 sharp and snappy poems, called *New Boots and Pantisocracies*.

The title is itself a sharp snap of verbal, poetic energy. It combines the title of Ian Dury's debut album of 1977, *New Boots and Pants*, with the name given by two young unacknowledged legislators – Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey – to their post-Revolutionary scheme to set up communities run on communist lines, or pantisocracies, in America.

Because the poetry is so topical, so varied and and so lively, the Soul Food column in this issue of *Communist Review* is devoted to a procession of poems from this collection.

To start with, Roddy Lumsden's weary, disgusted take on the surprise – and yet in some ways standard – result of the 2015 General Election:

At The Standard
by Roddy Lumsden

I cried all morning, said Francesca.
It's bad, I said. *It's bad*, came her echo.
Wrong world. A pint of Becks please,
this to the barmaid, and *a cure for hay fever*.
Get pregnant, she says. It works. Wrong
crawls all over the menu here. Spoilt
when our wallet spills. Once, we had
powsowdie, then microwaved macaroni.
Now our buns are glazed, omega seeds
are scattered. *Make the profiteroles large
to share*. That polecat rubs his mitts
in number ten. There is summer slaw,
kale pesto. Everything comes smothered.
Skin-on. Quinoa rules this establishment.
Standard. Sourdough, stout-cured, heritage.
I picture Cameron, ginger ale ketchup
infecting the razored gant where his chin
might have developed. *I've heard of it,*
is the most he can offer on disbelief.
Deep in the caliphate, knives are whetted.
America boils on borrowed gas. Baby gem
sounds tasty, but I long back sussed
that life is largely lies swanked up
and fed to you cold. Dearie me, fuck this.

Next, Ben Wilkinson's exercise in bitter irony and satire:

Building a Brighter, More Secure Future
(Conservative Party election manifesto slogan, 2015)
by Ben Wilkinson

You must understand what we are building
is not the housing we promised. Not a
hospital, or school. It is a brighter
notion, an idea of Britain, where more
food banks will flourish, but for those secure
there is no cause for alarm. The future

is a place where the rich hand the future
to the poor, in which the great buildings
of Canary Wharf, climbing secure
above Tower Hamlets, offer up a
glut of wealth to the unfortunate, more
than you can imagine. This is a brighter

future, we promise, it is much brighter
than a concept like equality. A future
cannot be built on that. We all want more,
and some people are better at building
wealth, or else inheriting it, so a
tax for those who are beyond secure

is unfair: they made their money secure
through society, and being brighter –
or otherwise having been born to a
fortune – will make sure that in the future

sometime, this trickles down. As a building
stands firm, you have our word that more
will come to those without. Making more
is paramount to our concerns. To secure
this, in the meantime we have cuts building
steadily, to public services that the brighter,
more secure have no need for. In the future
you may need them, but the future is a

notion, distant and unknowable, it is a
distraction. What we are promising is more.
What we promise is a secure future
and this will be true, for some. More secure
as the great sun of the City shines brighter,
casts its shadow. Look what we are building.

This is our future. What we have is a
mandate to fulfil, building a Britain more
secure. And for us, it will be brighter.

Next, Claudia Daventry skilfully and wittily expresses the view from the subjugated peripheries of Britain:

Brief
by Claudia Daventry

The point of pantisocracy
was all about democracy
equality, fraternity
and zero aristocracy.

In Glesga/Belfast/Leeds/Penzance
we didn't bank on folks in Hants
being anti-pantisocraphants.
Forget the sock. The outcome's pants.

*
PS: Aspheterism
When one is drinking herbal tea
and feeling thus bereft
one must remember, selflessly
that proper tea is theft.

Next, a complete change of tone from Jane Burn, a fine worker poet from Durham, who writes about the seemingly hopeless, alienated labour of her job in a supermarket:

Another Shift
by Jane Burn

Back to back, our chair wheels locking in a way
that makes us secretly hate our neighbour.
We swivel and watch the clock as if
we were whippets waiting for the bell.
The belts feed us lines of everyone's potatoes,
sanitary towels, scented candles, meat.

Every time I touch the cold of a haunch of pork
I want to clean myself. – I can feel the juices
of its smelly death. Sticky, like I had a juicy peach
with a side of horror. Un-lickable. I feel
the parasites of salmonella crawl my arms;
smile, remember to sell the saving stamps
that suck in the poor. Catch their Christmas
even though it's only May.

People complain about carrier bags – that they split
around boxes of bran flakes, let out the apples. Vodka
is always on offer – ditto the whisky and gin.
Keep them pissed – locked in their worlds
of local argument. We hate it here – every one of us
missing our children's milestones, swapping our joy
for minimum wage. We buy back our bit
of motherly love in ounces of fizz-bombs. We hope

our sons and daughters think of us as they suck on sugar –
hope their mouths make a memory of us in the chewing.
We buy our guilt in grams and sigh at next week's rota –
tell each other little stories of our lives, smooth
the bunches in our uniforms.
Whenever we have the chance,
we wash our hands.

Supermarket booze also features in this next poem by Luke Wright, which has a similar theme but a more conflicted tone, and with very different, much more bright and brittle rhymes and rhythms:

Lullaby
by Luke Wright

In half-heeled homes on terraced streets
the suburbs sing their psalms:
the charger buzz, the deadlock click,
the shrieking, far-off car alarm.

I'm sorry love, it's nothing much –
a carb and protein fix.
Remember how we used to eat
before the kids knocked us for six?

Then here again: the half-bought couch,
the supermarket wine,
the drip-drip of Netflix nights,
the whittling of our brittle time.

A soggy packed lunch Friday waits
so keep me from the sack.
I won't admit that this is it
but she's got meetings back-to-back:

And so, to that familiar song:
Oh, you go up, I won't be long.
The sad refrain to Big Ben's bong –
Yes, you go up I won't be long.

And now it's Newsnight, Question Time,
I tell myself that things are fine
as callow SPADS, unreal like sims
all sing their grim familiar hymns

And this is what we'll leave our kids:
the safety net in pieces,
the wolves well versed in double-baa
with tell-tale bloodstains down their fleeces.

What will I leave? Vented spleen?
Four-lettered verbal litter?
A spray of righteous leftist bile
at people just like me on Twitter?

So young, so young and yet so weary,
thumbs like scatterguns.
Another day of useless ire.
Exhausted, I ignored my sons

I've never cast a selfish vote,
nor backed a winner yet
but here I sit in up-lit comfort,
am I really that upset?

I sing along to Britain's song –
I pick my place among the throng
and sing their words so I belong –
You go up, I won't be long.

But look around the towns and shires
at all these gleaming steel-glass spires
and retail parks and malls so dear
and tell me who is thriving here.

Apocalyptic Friday sales
and zero hour contract sales
off-shore fixes, bedroom tax
while banks and business tip their hats

to politicians flush with chips
and healthcare firm directorships
the safe seats, and consultancies
that wring-out our democracy.

And couples like us, cleaved in two
with no idea what we can do
but proffer up a dour love
to things that can't empower us

or knock back booze or laugh it off,
make strongholds under covers,
or shelve our reason now and then
to scream, scream at each other.

Another fine evocation of the angry, bewildered and bewildering nature of the new social and political landscape is in a poem by Sean O'Brien:

The Chase
by Sean O'Brien

Hell might have a Function Room like this,
Where gravy fights it out with Harpic:
A mock-Tudor Midland roadhouse,
Thirties-built to meet the passing trade
Long since diverted down the bypass,
It fell on hard times, then on harder ones
And kept on falling through false floors,
Down shafts of optimistic anaglypta,
Past the cheap and cheerful weddings,
Underbooked conventions, lingerie events
And charismatic preachers braving out
The years God turned his face away.

The old place stands in hawthorn scrub
Beside the nibbled Chase, its car-park
Dogged by doggers. It must long for arson.
What it gets are damaged veterans
And others of uncertain provenance,
Would-be Werwolfs, left behind
To serve the cause from bunkers dug
Beneath allotments their St George's flags
Announce are Ingerland no more.
There will be those who speak, who bring
Fraternal greetings from 'our Flemish friends'
And those who listen with a hope so long
Deferred it is immortal. What began
One pale late summer evening here
Will end when darkness brings instructions
To prepare for the eternal Soon,
The ur-time worshipped in the true
Theology where things are otherwise.
But in the meantime minutes must be taken,
Grist to the banal resentments,
Nudges, localized atrocities, as omens of
The greater cause, and let no one forget
That there are windows to be licked
And public discourse to be joined
Until, on average eighteen seconds in,
The call's cut off at Radio Chase ('It's where
The middle of the Midlands is') again.

These are the relatives you never see now
Since your parents' generation died.
You do remember, yes, the awkwardness –
A funeral tea held somewhere like the Chase,
That might have even been the Chase,
A flyblown nowhere, birches, ponds,
With HGVs parked up in laybys full of rubbish
And a sense that give or take this could be
Any time since 1931.
And someone's husband joining you outside
To smoke, assuming you'd agree
With his shy-smiling bigotry about
'Our friends from the subcontinent.'
You can't remember what you said. You can,
And it was nothing, while he stood his ground
There in the carpark, and if he sensed
That you were clenching with embarrassment
You couldn't tell. He'd made his point,
While you declared you'd better make a start
And he advised what roads you should avoid,
And never blinked, while here in hindsight
You're still blinking at the shame of it
When accident has brought you back
Down these unfashionable routes,
And then contrived the need to stop
And get a sandwich.
Sunday afternoon
In Albion's excluded middle.
The meeting is concluding on the far side
Of the corridor. The literature is all there
At the back beside the runes and ornamental
Daggers that make lovely gifts. To say it takes
All sorts may be a fallacy, but here they are
And here you are, again. The sandwich comes.

You watch them load their tat and nonsense
Back into the knacker's van. You are confused
By a persistent disbelief that this
Can be the case, this levee of Poujadists
Dawdling by their cars till those with homes
To go to go there, and those with holes
Hole up to count the days till their black sun
Rises on this honest plain of Midland
Ash and spoil and their inheritance is saved
From everyone, including you.
Too bored to laugh, too tired to cry, you think
These people do not matter. Then they do.

Next, Jan Dean imagines what is going to happen, both the oppression and the revolt:

Cleaning up
by Jan Dean

benches with no backs
and pigeon spikes for people

we'll have no roosting here
no rough sleep roosting here

no rough rest roost no
we'll have none of it

no beggars here
no empty tin can hand out

believe me we're well rid
of in the red

and when we rewrite riding hood
the wolf will win

no cosy welfare for a granny
idling in a bed

old and idling is no way to be
we're for the wolf's initiative

his bootstrap drive
and problem solving nous

and as for axes
let the woodsman fell the trees

we love a burning a burning
a burning

Here's a poem with a similar movement:

When We Have Nothing
by Angela Readman

Come with me when we have nothing,
picnic on air. The blanket we roll out
is the shadow of lovers who lay in parks
barefoot, planning their lives. Lie with me,
where the cutlery is laid in no particular
order, pick up a knife forged by what's left
of the day, slashing through the shed.
Ours hands know better, but reach
for invisible peaches, a slow dance of fur
we dare to imagine courting our fingers
picking strawberries that simply aren't
there. Our fruit is fatly unripe, waits for a rash
of July to colour it in. Our hearts are
the same, outlines, studded with promises
that stick in our teeth. Come, bite in
now while our stomachs storm a thunder
and our eyes are lightning, forked to strike.

Next, three poems which also imagine change, but perhaps in a less fiery or spectacular way:

Counter Culture
by S J Litherland

In alleys of Peckham austerity has stalls,
and wandering artists trailing hope, a small
revolution, cheap breakfasts cooked in caravans,
a mixture of Sunday and Caribbean flavours;
in derelict car parks the highest level a café
for top scenes over London, insouciance
ahead of the trend and billionaire lock-ins,
you can breathe the air of old markets;
the futures are not for sale; unmanned galleries
and eternal avant-garde stapled on walls;
artists have moved south of the river like terns,
flocks appoint what's depleted into hideaways
for the cognoscenti, Peckham the hub-cultural
landscape we're always seeking beneath the capital
trademarks, where poets and painters shift their wares,
Bohemia that comes and goes like the tidal
river that snakes through the banks of the City,
the collectives, the communes, the free spirit;
and in tall towers, spikes, and otherwise columns
of money, they're unaware and too square.
Irritating what money can't buy, in their highrise
systems, dry with air conditioning and precise
desk tops, the huge stairways in their atriums.
It's money talking suits, striped shirts and gyms.
All those old gangland corners of South London,
Catford and Elton, infiltration has begun,
artists with time and too little cash are street
changers, word buskers, the shakers,
moving waves that defeat the consortium
underneath their eyes, their charts, self-esteem;
artists pay no attention to austerity
and bad vibes. They're not bought or sold.
They don't recognise that currency.

One Nation
by George Szirtes

1
The place hasn't changed. Things are in their place.
Things remain exactly what they were: just things.
Home comforts are what we expect of home.

Sunlight hovers on walls, remaining sunlight

even when spread on pavements. Our keel is more or less even.
Our clothes are comfortable simply because they're our clothes.

Back to front, front to back we go, until we're back
at the front. We try to preserve a united front.
Here is where we are: our place is always here.

2
The softness of the place, the pressing into grass.
The warmth when it arrives as a kind of grace.

The soft bricks, the earth that crumbles. Rain
that gentles and does not precipitate ruin.

Temperate climes. Our fingers on the pulse
of dinner and bed, the night fumbling for pills.

3
The poor will get poorer, the rich richer. The wind
of fortune bloweth where it listeth. Justice is blind,
a woman with a switchblade. We preserve our kind.
Our forces remain alert and disciplined.

We will creep a little closer to the ground.
After today we will face the everyday grind
with less resolution. Things will be defined.
Life will be returned exactly as found.

4
But something will have broken. The broken chair
will litter up the hall. The broken machine will
rust in the shed. Meanwhile jets rise into a sky
where nothing breaks or, when it does, things fall
and break still more. The broken do not fly.
The year begins in pieces on the floor.

5
Something at the heart of all this. Something
in the soil that is our common soil.
Grass gives way to rain that softens grass,

weather in the heart is an aspect of weather,
cliffs collapse into water leaving steeper cliffs,
houses fall with them, then there are no houses.

The New Curriculum
by Suzannah Evans

With half an hour left of Double Jargon
Simon stood up from his chair.
He'd already earned detention that day
by saying that the air conditioning
sounded like the noise that you hear
when you put your ear to a shell
and now here he was, leaning
against the window, hands and breath
greasing the polished glass.

The rest of the class were silent
as they worked towards outcomes
or looked forward to their class trip
to the trading floor
and when the teacher asked Simon
what he was looking at
he sat back down without saying a word
but it was too late
all the others had followed his gaze
out towards the perimeter fence
where the swifts were
throwing their bodies through the joyous air
their wings the shape of boomerangs.

Let's draw to a close with some words from Bill Herbert's introduction, about the power of poetry:

> "Where we place our faith, after all, is in the rhetorical, formal, musical, and symbolic power of the poem, not just to move or to persuade, but to present to us how it is to be within an historical moment, constantly struggling, not to transcend it but to confront it, with all our senses, our conscience and our intellect alive to its beauty, its terror, and its transience.
> That seems to us to be where, on a daily basis, poetry and politics meet, and where each may transform the other."

But the final word should lie with the poets, and our last poem is a smile of scarlet defiance. Imagine, as you read the poem at the start of the anniversary year of the Russian Revolution, that the italicised words are in bright, revolutionary red:

Lipstick
by Magi Gibson

Putting on my make-up at the bathroom mirror,
– for me, a daily act, a sacrament, a quiet solemnity –
I find my lipstick's almost done – a blunt mess
of sticky red at the bottom of its silver bullet case.

But how can I think of shopping for lipstick
while food banks sprout like bindweed in our towns,
while refugees flee burnt-out homes, while bombs drop
on bathrooms just like this, where I stand
the whole world in a state of chassis
wondering what colour I might choose –
Shrapnel Wound Vermillion, Refugee Red,
or maybe plump for *Damson Purple Bruise?*

Later, on the TV news, a woman picks her way
through an endless stretch of dust-encrusted shelters,
heaving a weighty water carrier, a bright spot of colour
in the endless grey, like a tropical bird, or a princess
stepped from a Scheherazade tale, in a dress
of ruby reds and emerald greens,
long hair brushed to a blue-black sheen,
dark eyes rimmed with smoky kohl.
I've lost my home, my family, she tells the camera.
I will not let them take my femininity.

Then she smiles. A lipsticked smile.

A smile of scarlet defiance.

Notes on the Contributors

Jane Burn's poems have featured in *The Rialto, Butcher's Dog, Iota Poetry, And Other Poems, The Black Light Engine Room* and many more, as well as anthologies from the Emma Press, Beautiful Dragons, Poetry Box and Kind of a Hurricane Press. She also established the poetry website The Fat Damsel.

Claudia Daventry has lived in Fife since 2007. Her poetry is published in Scotland and beyond, most recently in *The Oligarch Loses His Patience* (Templar, 2015), and in *A Modern Don Juan* (Five Leave Publications, 2014). Among other awards, her work has won the Bridport and Ruskin prizes.

Jan Dean is mainly known as a children's poet. She works as poet-in-schools and also runs workshops for children and adults in libraries and at festivals. *The Penguin in Lost Property* (Macmillan, 2014) is her latest children's book, co-authored with Roger Stevens. Jan is from the North West but is now living in the South West.

Suzannah Evans lives in Sheffield and her pamphlet *Confusion Species* was a winner in the 2011 Poetry Business Book and Pamphlet Competition. In 2013 she received a Northern Writers' Award and her poetry has been published in magazines including *Magma, The Rialto* and *The North*.

Magi Gibson is a Scottish poet. She's had four collections published, including *Wild Women of a Certain Age* (Chapman, 2000), now in its fourth print run. She won the *Scotland on Sunday/*Women 2000 prize for poetry, and has held three Scottish Arts Council Creative Writing Fellowships and a major Scottish Arts Council Bursary. She runs the Wild Women Writing Workshops in Scotland and Ireland.

S J Litherland's seventh poetry collection *Composition in White* will be published by Smokestack in 2017. Commended twice in the National Poetry Competition, holder of two Northern Writers' Awards, she has been published by North East presses Flambard, Iron and Bloodaxe. She is a founding member of Vane Women.

Roddy Lumsden has published nine collections. His latest book is *Not All Honey* (Bloodaxe, 2014). He teaches for the Poetry School.

Sean O'Brien is a multi-award-winning poet, novelist, dramatist, and critic who has published more than a dozen collections of poetry, essays and criticism. His latest collection *The Beautiful Librarians* was published by Picador in 2015.

Angela Readman's short story collection *Don't Try This at Home* won a Saboteur Award, and The Rubery Book Award in 2015. Her poems have won the Mslexia Poetry Competition, The Essex Poetry Prize and the Charles Causley.

George Szirtes's most recent book of poems, *Bad Machine* (2013) was shortlisted for the TS Eliot Prize which he won in 2004 for *Reel*.

Ben Wilkinson's *For Real* won both a Northern Writers' Award and the Poetry Business Competition in 2014. He reviews for the *Guardian*, and is as an editor for the Poetry Archive. With support from Arts Council England, he is working on his debut full collection.

Luke Wright is a poet and theatre maker. His debut collection *Mondeo Man* was published by Penned in the Margins in 2013, to critical acclaim. His play, *What I Learned from Johnny Bevan,* debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe 2015 earning a Fringe First Award for writing and The Stage Award for Acting Excellence.

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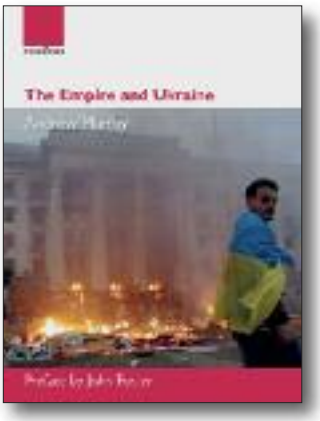

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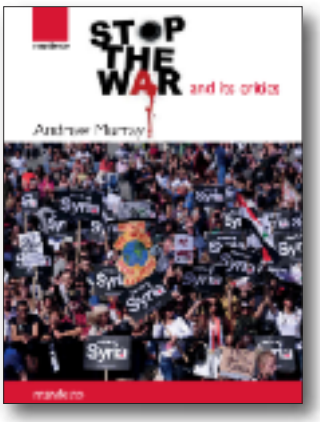

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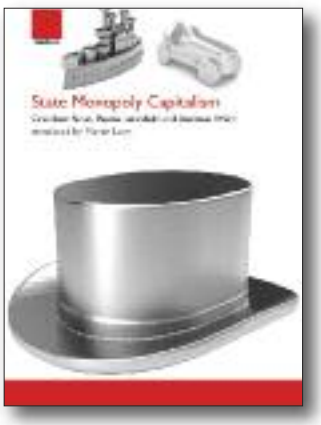

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