

# What Next?

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*Trotsky, Ecology and Sustainability*

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# The Prophet Misarmed: Trotsky, Ecology and Sustainability

**Sandy Irvine**

Leon Trotsky showed great insight on many issues but, argues Sandy Irvine, his biggest blind spot concerned ecological sustainability, now the greatest issue of our times. His thinking reflected the technological cornucopianism that bedevils the socialist tradition. Unless addressed it threatens to render the movement unable to address today's primary challenge.

**I**T IS a tribute to Leon Trotsky's standing that his ideas are still widely discussed. If the number of ex-members as well as actual supporters of avowedly and quasi-Trotskyist groups were to be counted, the total would reveal an army of people who, to some extent at least, have been influenced by his thought and deeds. It is not a question of numbers per se. Many leading figures in contemporary anti-globalisation, anti-racism and "stop the war" movements are Trotskyists in the broadest sense of the word. Many apolitical citizens are aware of his struggle with Stalin and subsequent fate. The David and Goliath quality of this battle only adds interest.<sup>1</sup>

However, discussion of his life and legacy tends to stick to well-worn contours of debate. Hostile critics focus on his alleged role in building a Bolshevik dictatorship which, it is further argued, was ready and waiting for Stalin to take over. Sometimes the criticism focuses specifically on his role in the Russian Civil War and his desire to militarise the workforce. His role in the suppression of the 1921 Kronstadt mutiny invites particular condemnation. Admirers, however, praise his role in the Bolshevik seizure of power, his leadership of the Red Army in defence of the Revolution and his relentless opposition to not just Stalin himself but also the state bureaucracy on which Stalinism rested.

Trotsky's intellectual endeavours also arouse passionate disputation. Some object to his rather hagiographical writings on Lenin and his sometimes crude evocation of materialist dialectics. Amongst Marxists of a more independent hue, there has been considerable criticism of his theorising about the nature of Stalinist Russia (a "workers' state", albeit much degenerated). The same goes

for the wishful thinking that led Trotsky to believe it opportune to declare a new international movement, the so-called Fourth International. His tendency to see every political setback as but a crisis of leadership is also much disparaged for its oversimplicity.

It is argued here that Trotsky both reflected and encouraged an even worse tendency amongst the radical Left, namely an almost total myopia about the most significant of all developments in the 20th century, the ecological crisis. It is the most serious, all-embracing challenge of our times. Global overwarming is only one of many symptoms of dangerous planetary disorder. Not only did Trotsky fail to anticipate the most serious failing in the dominant social and economic order, he actually endorsed technologies, lifestyle choices and policy goals that could only serve to increase the unsustainable impact of humankind on the Earth's life-support systems. (The threat from nuclear war will not be discussed since, fortunately, it remains only a possibility whereas ecological meltdown is an actuality.)

Trotsky as case study

The following study focuses on one person. In doing so, it also comments on the more general socialist tradition, especially its Marxist variant of which he was a leading representative. Trotsky provides a particularly good case study. Whatever his failings, he was a very intelligent man. His writings on literature and other arts show great subtlety. He demonstrated immense foresight on many issues, especially the threat from Fascism. In his early political career, he perceptively warned of the dangers of excessive centralism in political organisations. In short, Trotsky combined re-

markable erudition with often sharp perception.

His ecological blind spot was not some personal failing but the product of a whole political tradition that, in this respect at least, was gravely flawed. Unless corrected, this ecological blinkeredness will make it as irrelevant as more conventional politics, no matter what sensible things socialist activists might say about specific matters such as the better funding of public services, job security, protection of citizen rights, militarism and the closing of the wealth-poverty gap.

Any discussion of Trotsky's thinking must start from what, realistically, he could have known at the time. It needs to be noted immediately that there was already a body of thought that recognised the dangerous road down which humankind was travelling in his own lifetime. Those who did not see this must, therefore, be judged myopic. There are no grounds for the rather lame excuse that people back then could not have known what only now we are able to understand. There were prescient individuals who certainly managed to see what Trotsky did not.

Some came from the socialist movement itself. Actually, back in the 19th century, Karl Marx had spotted some danger signs of human abuse of the environment. He particularly highlighted the threat from soil erosion. Marx also criticised the Gotha Programme of the German Social Democrats for treating human labour as the only source of wealth. Marx was not alone. Trotsky's contemporary the Polish-born revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg was a keen student of botany and ornithology. She spotlighted the utterly ruinous effects of imperialism in particular. The German Marxist Karl Kautsky had noted the destructive impacts of agrochemical-intensive farming in his *Agrarian Question* (1899). Leaders of the British Socialist League (1885-1901) were particularly vocal in condemning not just human exploitation but also the environmental costs of the Industrial Revolution.

Yet these were exceptions to the dominant socialist tradition. Most alarm about the effects of environmental abuse as well as understanding of its causes has come from outside the ranks of socialism, reformist or revolutionary. By Trotsky's birth, there was already a strong literature on the matter.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in his lifetime, there was ample evidence of the grave risks attendant on increased human pressure on the planet. Symptomatic of the human impact was the death in 1914 of the last surviving Passenger Pigeon, once the most populous bird on the planet. The year before, William Hornaday had published *Our Vanishing Wildlife* in the wake of the near destruction of American buffalo and other assaults on biodiversity.

In fact environmental concern has a very long history. Amongst the first settled "civilisations" there were those sensitive to human damage to the web of life. Back in the 5th century BC, for

example, Herodotus observes that "man stalks across the landscape and deserts follow in his footsteps". Not long after, Plato had bemoaned the tide of human destructiveness. There was also Epicurus who clearly enunciated the conservation principles that make a nonsense of the still widely held delusion that we can get more from less, or that technology will create resources out of thin air or make wastes magically disappear.

In Trotsky's own lifetime, the American dust-bowl disaster of the 1930s had affected millions. It was widely publicised through studies like *Deserts on the March* by Paul Sears (1935) and by "New Deal" photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein (who snapped the famous "Father and sons in dust storm" image). Geographers such as Carl Sauer were also charting human destruction of wildlife, while human depletion of resources was being highlighted by ornithologist William Vogt and zoologist Fairfield Osborn. There was growing awareness, amongst historians at least, of much older human "own goals", as marked by the ecological suicide of civilisations as diverse as ancient Sumeria, the Roman Empire, Angkor Wat and Easter Island.

Conversely, efforts to protect environmental systems were already being made, albeit ones too weak to resist the tide of further destruction. It is even said that wildlife protection can be traced as far back as the (Buddhist) Maurya Empire in southern Asia (some two hundred and fifty years BC). Perhaps it was the Taoists of ancient China who as a group first articulated a systematic ecological perspective.

From the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era, voices with a distinctly ecological timbre can be heard. They included St Francis of Assisi, who anticipated the rise of a sensibility that showed greater respect for other lifeforms, and the Englishman John Evelyn from the Late Stuart period, who denounced pollution. In the 18th century, the Scottish physician James Hutton clearly enunciated an organic and cyclical view of the Earth and its life processes. The year of the French Revolution also saw the publication in England of a landmark in nature writing, *The Natural History of Selbourne* by Reverend Gilbert White (1720-1793), who displayed an attunement to the particularities and beauties of his locality which bioregionalists are advocating some two hundred years later.

Public measures against pollution and environmental despoliation date back several centuries. The burning of sea coal was banned back in medieval England while, in Victorian times, the 1858 "Great Stink" in London led to action over sewage disposal. In 1872 the first National Park (Yellowstone) had been created (though the foundations of Yosemite National Park were actually laid by Lincoln in 1864). Indeed individuals such as William Wordsworth in England and George Catlin

in the USA had been campaigning for such systems of protection much earlier in the 19th century. By mid-century, there were individuals such as Henry Thoreau who were questioning the whole industrial order.

Scientific awareness had also developed. Thomas Malthus had raised the issue of environmental constraints on population growth in his *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). In the same period, Jean Baptiste Lamarck developed the science of biology. Whatever the merits of his views on heredity, he correctly perceived the Earth as an interconnected system, in which its living and non-living parts dynamically shaped one another. Human rootedness in ecological systems had been spotlighted by Charles Darwin amongst others. George Marsh had spelled out in detail ecological constraints on human activity, especially in his *Man and Nature* (1864).

The German biologist Ernst Haeckel popularised the word “ecology” in the 1860s, a word based on the Greek “oikos” or home, terminology which carries connotations of something to protect and cherish. Another word, “biosphere”, introduced by Eduard Suess in 1875, also encouraged a holistic appreciation of the living world, thus challenging the dominant reductionist approach. Understanding of thermodynamic constraints on energy conversion had been deepened by a string of researchers such as Sadi Carnot (1796-1832), Rudolf Clausius (1822-1888) and Lord Kelvin (1824-1907). Alfred Lotka (1880-1949) and others had linked population dynamics and energetics. The idea that geology would set constraints on resource availability had been highlighted by economists such as Stanley Jevons (1835-1882). John Stuart Mill had advocated a “steady-state economy” in the same year the *Communist Manifesto* was published.

Actually scientists inside the young Soviet Union had been working towards an ecological view of the world. In 1926 Vladimir Vernadsky, for example, published his *Biosphere*, whose very title evokes a picture of humans as but one part of a bigger system. His work further spotlights the limit capacity of ecosystems to underwrite human activity, not least full-speed industrialisation. Nature was not some limitless, free asset, there to be used and abused at will.

The purpose of this potted history is to demonstrate that the intellectual and aesthetic “where-withal” was already in place for an intelligent and well-read man like Leon Trotsky to grasp the ecological message ... had not other values and perceptions got in the way. It may be objected that, most of his life, Trotsky had his head and hands somewhat full with other pressing matters. Yet he did find time to address ecological issues such as land use, technology and consumption choices – but, it will be argued, analysed them from an unsustainable perspective.

Ecoview

The following critique of Trotsky will draw upon what the British political scientist Andrew Dobson has called “ecologism”, others “ecocentrism”. The kernel of this tradition is the view of people, not as conquerors of nature, but as “plain members and citizens of it”, in the words of the American forester Aldo Leopold, a near contemporary of Trotsky. Concepts like interdependence, balance and especially limits provide the framework through which we would think about, value and do things.<sup>3</sup>

Ecologism puts first the Earth and its life-support systems, on which depend many species, not just people. The key perspective in analytical terms might be called “limits-to-growth” theory, while the practical conclusion to be drawn from it is that humans must all learn to tread more lightly and to “share smaller pies” as the American writer Tom Bender once put it. The conventional goal of universal affluence-for-all (defined in terms of physical consumption in the manner of the typical citizen of a country like Britain) is, viewed in this paradigm, an impossible goal. Furthermore, sustained attempts to achieve it can only be suicidal, given the unavoidable side-effects.

Before assessing Trotsky’s thoughts, it may be helpful to clarify the meaning of “ecology” and “ecological”. It is most useful to use the term broadly. Thus “ecocentrism” embraces:

1. Appreciation of the diversity of landforms and lifeforms ecosystems contain, in terms of utilitarian, aesthetic and, above all, intrinsic value;

2. Awareness of ecological systems and their dynamics, i.e. ecology in its narrowest “scientific” sense;

3. Understanding of human dependence on what is the “real wealth of nations”, not just specific resources but the wide variety of “life-support” services delivered by ecosystems, from specific ones such as mangrove swamps and coral reefs to, say, the entire atmosphere;

4. Comprehension of the magnitude and range of human impacts on the rest of nature and its consequences for humans and other species alike;

5. Analysis of the sources of those pressures, specifically a) human population growth, b) per capita consumption and c) the technologies used to deliver a given range of goods and services to a given number of people, including the institutional framework through which such choices are mediated;

6. Prescription of policies that can put the relationship between humanity and the rest of nature on a less destructive and more durable footing: “tread lightly”.

Point 1 above must be particularly stressed. Without some sense of respect for the intrinsic merit of non-human nature, including a corresponding willingness to constrain human activity, there will always be some immediate and seem-

ingly unanswerable case to take one “bite” out of the planet. After all, it often seems as if anthropogenic extinction of wildlife is “cost-free” or that an extra dollop of pollution will make no difference, at least in the here and now. Further, it is impossible to put a precise figure on how much this wetland or that old-growth woodland is financially worth. Purely utilitarian calculations are, then, likely to encourage further steps down the road of ecological suicide.

Thus ecologism spans both science and morality. It rests itself on what steady-state economist Herman Daly calls the “ultimate means” (i.e. high quality and readily available energy and matter, both the means of and conditions for production without which human or any other form of life is not possible) and the “ultimate ends” (i.e. the goals of an ethically responsible life). Given that Trotsky was proud to place himself in the tradition of scientific socialism, it is rather ironic that he based so little of his thought on the teachings of geology, thermodynamics and ecology. At the same time of course, he had little time for “bourgeois” ethics (see his writings on the suppression of the Kronstadt mutiny, for example).

It is important here to underline the dangers inherent in a related word: “environment.” It is a term that almost invites its own marginalisation. It can be taken to mean everything around an individual, not just air, water, soil and so forth but also bad housing, poor schooling, unsatisfactory domestic circumstances and the like. It can mean just about everything ... and therefore nothing much in particular. Sight is thereby lost of the critical issue: the Earth’s life-support systems and the fact that on their well-being humankind is utterly and inescapably dependent. Furthermore, the issue is not just the damaging impact of resource depletion, pollution and environmental degradation. That in itself is scarcely a radical insight. It is that ecological protection is all important; no matter how pressing or worthy, all else is secondary.

#### On ecology

It must be noted immediately that Trotsky wrote no books or pamphlets nor, as far as can be traced, made a single speech directly on any of the themes just listed. Instead there are a number of passing references, largely on certain technologies but also lifestyle expectations. It must be admitted that Trotsky wrote so extensively on a quite remarkable range of topics that it would be easy to miss other comments he may have made. However the real issue is not so much specific points of analysis but rather the whole framework through which he perceived what was wrong with the world and how things might be put right. It is here that there are the most glaring contradictions with an ecologically guided and, therefore, sustainable perspective.

Trotsky’s longest statement is to be found in his study *Literature and Revolution* (1924). It reads thus:

“The present distribution of mountains and rivers, of fields, of meadows, of steppes, of forests, and of seashores, cannot be considered final. Man has already made changes in the map of nature that are not few nor insignificant. But they are mere pupils’ practice in comparison with what is coming. Faith merely promises to move mountains; but technology, which takes nothing ‘on faith’, is actually able to cut down mountains and move them. Up to now this was done for industrial purposes (mines) or for railways (tunnels); in the future this will be done on an immeasurably larger scale, according to a general industrial and artistic plan. Man will occupy himself with re-registering mountains and rivers, and will earnestly and repeatedly make improvements in nature. In the end, he will have rebuilt the earth, if not in his own image, at least according to his own taste. We have not the slightest fear that this taste will be bad....

“The poetry of the earth is not eternal, but changeable, and man began to sing articulate songs only after he had placed between himself and the earth implements and instruments which were the first simple machines.... Through the machine, man in Socialist society will command nature in its entirety, with its grouse and its sturgeons. He will point out places for mountains and for passes. He will change the course of the rivers, and he will lay down rules for the oceans....

“Of course this does not mean that the entire globe will be marked off into boxes, that the forests will be turned into parks and gardens. Most likely, thickets and forests and grouse and tigers will remain, but only where man commands them to remain. And man will do it so well that the tiger won’t even notice the machine, or feel the change, but will live as he lived in primeval times. The machine is not in opposition to the earth. The machine is the instrument of modern man in every field of life.”

It can be seen that there were conservation strains in Trotsky’s thinking. In fact, the early Bolshevik regime had set aside the Zapovednik, a nature conservation system, starting with a site on Lake Baikal in 1917. Presumably Trotsky agreed with this strategy whose main purpose was scientific study so that lessons could be learned for agriculture and other human production systems. Its very real value notwithstanding, the plan had more in common with the enlightened resource managerialism of Gifford Pinchot of the American Forestry Service than with his conservationist opponents, in particular John Muir. More importantly, the system quickly came under assault during the Industrialisation drive, many state planners deeming it to be of no value, merely a wasted asset. (In that respect, they pre-echoed the so-called Wise

Use movement in the USA.)

The compatibility of Trotsky's economic vision with environmental conservation will be discussed later. For now, it can be recognised that Trotsky is prepared to concede some space to non-human nature but it is equally clear that such an allocation is courtesy of human tolerance which may permit flora and fauna to exist ... or may not. There is no element of "intrinsic value" (compare his views with those of John Muir, Aldo Leopold or Arne Naess).

More significantly, he seems to perceive ecological systems as so much stuff, simply there to be reshaped in any way people want. That such manipulation might easily become unsustainable and counter-productive clearly eludes him. Nor is there any appreciation that ecological "health", including biodiversity, depends on the maintenance of a dense network of large-scale reserves and corridors linking them, free from any direct human exploitation (see the modern work of groups like the American Wildlands project). Similarly he shows no sign of understanding the ecological significance of, say, old-growth forests compared with monocultural plantations or that rearranged hydrology is likely to trigger disastrous blow-backs (more severe flooding etc). It would be absurd to criticise Trotsky for not knowing this or that aspect of ecology. The subject is the most complex of all intellectual disciplines. But it is fair to suggest that not only did he not know about such perspectives, he also, and more importantly, did not care to know, glibly endorsing all kinds of human gambling with ecological systems.

To underline the point: a certain mindset misled his thinking.

The new god

Trotsky was a genuinely radical thinker in many ways but, with regards to the issues being discussed here, it must also be stressed just how conventional was his thought. The quote from *Literature and Revolution* conceivably could have been written by people across the political spectrum, all of whom shared the same underlying vision of "Progress", albeit one defined in particular ways.

This worldview was forged in the technological, economic, intellectual and political upheavals of the British Industrial Revolution and the European Enlightenment (though it was in the newborn USA that "theory" was to be most quickly turned into "practice"). Marxism was but one of its heirs, with Trotsky as a particularly loyal follower. Belief in Progress and attendant activity on the ground have proved to be a development of unprecedented explosive force. As William Woodruff once put it, "no civilisation prior to the European had occasion to believe in the systematic material progress of the whole human race; no civilisation drove itself so relentlessly to an ever-

receding goal; no civilisation was so passion-charged to replace what is with what could be; no civilisation had striven as the West has done to direct the world according to its will".

At the heart of this particular concept of Progress is a mentality of "moreness": more people consuming more things, courtesy of more powerful technologies and more control over every aspect of life. This constitutes, in the words of Christopher Lasch, "the only true heaven". As American biologist Garrett Hardin puts it, "growth, change, 'development', spending, rapid turnover [are] viewed as goods without limits. Anything else is archaic or at best undeveloped, waiting to be developed or 'take off' in the direction of those societies blessed with the widest array of consumer goods and technological devices."<sup>4</sup>

In *Ninety Years of the Communist Manifesto*, Trotsky duly refers to the lands of Asia, Latin America and Africa as "backward countries". Not for him any pause to consider whether their cultures – or at least aspects of them – might offer equally valid paths of development and perhaps more sustainable ones. Not surprisingly, then, he refers to Ghandi as "a fake leader and a false prophet" (*Open Letter to the Workers of India*, 1939). Indeed, his writings often display a deep contempt for non-urban ways. "The entire future work of the Revolution will be directed towards ... uprooting the idiocy of village life", he writes in *Literature and Revolution*. He similarly sneers at "peasant-singing intelligentsia". Urbanism is the only future: "the city lives and leads." (For some reason, he even takes a swipe at "home-brew": presumably the only politically correct pint is one served from giant state breweries!)

Trotsky followed the tradition of thinkers like Sir Francis Bacon who argued that the reason for trying to understand nature better is to command it the more. Trotsky agreed. As he put it in 1918: "The proper goal of communism is the domination of nature by technology and the domination of technology by planning, so that raw materials of nature will yield to mankind all that it needs and more besides" (cited by Deutscher in *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929*, OUP). He frequently returned to this theme. Thus: "men ... need to subordinate nature to themselves" (speech at a centennial celebration of Mendeleev in 1925).

Here Trotsky was echoing Engels. The latter's ideas on "scientific socialism" rested on a vision of post-capitalism in which "the whole sphere of the conditions of life, which environ man, and which hitherto ruled man, who [under the new socialism] for the first time becomes the real, conscious lord of Nature". There is no room for any doubt that humankind might be a reckless and feckless boss or for any recognition that humans would still depend on nature, no matter how powerful human technologies. Engels and Trotsky were too steeped in what Ehrenfeld calls

“the arrogance of Humanism”. They could not see that human lordship might be no more than a “fleeting supremacy”, as John Livingstone once put it.

Essentially, Mother Earth is an inefficient, disorderly indeed treacherous bitch. In his *In Defence of October*, for example, Trotsky sneers at the “demons and furies of nature” over which, he then says, “now reigns ever more courageously the industrious will of man”. Nature, it seems, must be brought to heel and harnessed to the fulfilment of open-ended and indiscriminate human demands. In *Literature and Revolution*, he even predicts, with evident enthusiasm, that “man will learn to ... build peoples’ palaces on the peaks of Mont Blanc and at the bottom of the Atlantic”.

In his *In Defence of October*, Trotsky makes no mention of ecology, despite the rapid growth of the discipline, even though he was at the time head of all Soviet scientific institutions. Moreover, his thinking seems shaped by reductionist and mechanistic approaches whose weaknesses scientists such as Fritjof Capra have been at pains to demonstrate. He does, however, refer to Darwin, though Trotsky’s purpose is to enrol him as an unwitting advocate of dialectical materialism. To his great credit, Trotsky does make a passing critique of that gross distortion of evolutionary science which today uses biology to justify socially created inequality.

Technologically, Progress is equated with ever more powerful machines and intricate production systems. Economically, success has been perceived in terms of more and more physical output. Not surprisingly, hugely optimistic targets were at the heart of Soviet planning. Like Lenin, Trotsky was an enthusiastic advocate of scientific management (“Taylorism”) and, more generally, assembly-line production or “Fordism” (Lenin: “American efficiency is that indomitable force which neither knows nor recognises obstacles”).<sup>5</sup> This worldview is intimately linked to the industrialisation of farming and forestry, round-the-clock assembly line manufacturing and, more recently, genetic engineering. Even the building blocks of Life are to be made more productive. The connecting thread is an unsustainably narrow concept of efficiency, which in reality are only attained at the unsustainable cost of bigger “inefficiencies”, once all human and environmental costs and risks are taken into account.

The new USSR proudly displayed its new symbols of this model of Progress. They included lines of electricity pylons striding over hill and dale (Lenin once defined socialism as “Soviets plus electrification”). It was also embodied in massive dams that sought to tame once wild rivers. The virtually useless White Sea-Baltic Canal, opened in 1933, was another such symbol, one costing tens of thousands of lives. The towering skyscraper building too symbolises this model of Progress

(many Russian and East European cities are still scarred with giant emblems of Soviet Gothic architecture). Trotsky did strongly criticise certain means used by Stalin but he made fewer criticisms of the goals.

Though it has become fashionable to spotlight allegedly “green” elements in Nazism (experiments in organic farming, etc), Hitler’s dictatorship followed a similar agenda to that of the Soviet government. They too enthusiastically embraced all that was modern in such forms as autobahns and aeroplanes, including proto-computers like the Hollerich calculating machine. Nazi hostility to groups like the Bauhaus was based on hostility to its proponents rather than a questioning of advanced industrial technology per se. The Reich Food Estate Exhibitions celebrated the industrialisation of farming as much as Soviet “poets” of collectivisation like Dovzhenko (director of *Earth*) and Eisenstein (especially his *The General Line*). The Nazis also backed huge schemes to destroy wetlands. Most significantly, the Nazis propagated a cult of motherhood and of procreation, i.e. human population growth, a decidedly anti-Earth position and one mimicked under Stalinist Communism (Romanian dictator Ceausescu being one of the worst exponents).

Perhaps the most enthusiastic embrace of Industrial Progress was to be the Chinese Communist Party both in its Maoist and especially later pro-Market guises. Vicious Stalinist and therefore anti-Trotskyist thug though he was, Chinese dictator Mao Zedong thoroughly agreed with Trotsky on one thing: “Man Must Conquer Nature”.<sup>6</sup> The vast Three Gorges scheme on the Yangtze continues the tradition under his successors. The key point, then, is that “technocentric” perceptions of progress had a very wide range of subscribers of which Trotsky was a particularly uncritical adherent.

### Regress of nature

Trotsky’s views on the environment and land use conform to the dominant mindset of the last two hundred years. “Non-human nature” has been perceived as mere raw material, there to be managed and manipulated, as people see fit. Wild rivers, for example, are waiting to be “harnessed” and virgin forests “harvested” or otherwise “put to work”. This worldview came to dominate the minds of many of society’s critics, not just defenders of the status quo.

To take one example: “Hail, glorious Science! For thou can’st impart a charm to humanise the savage heart; If not for thee, this beauteous earth had been a wilderness – a den of savage men; Without a language, and without a mind – With bodies naked, lashed by every wind. Had not fair Science worked out Nature’s plan, the brute had held dominion over man.” These were the words of Allen Davenport, a 19th century shoemaker and follower of the radical reformer Robert Owen but,

stylistically amended, they could have been written by a wide range of thinkers.

The conception of Progress consists, then, of transforming nature into forms that are imposed by human beings – which, in practice, meant industrialised farms, factories and cities. Thus, in the Soviet Union, the semi-arid steppes were viewed as wastelands to be put under the plough (with disastrous results due to soil erosion). In the more far-fetched visions of Soviet planners festered gigantic schemes to divert whole river systems from the Arctic north to dry zones of the south.

The practical implications of the vision expressed by Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution* and elsewhere is little different to what was done by the Tennessee Valley Authority of Roosevelt's New Deal era, the American Bureau of Land Management and the of Army Corps of Engineers.<sup>7</sup> They are no more different than that of many, many development agencies, ranging from international bodies such as the United Food and Agriculture Organisation, national bodies such as Britain's Forestry Commission and Drainage Boards as well as a myriad regional and local development agencies.

The World Bank could have been quoting Trotsky in its statement on dam construction and development: "It is difficult to conceive of a scenario in which India can afford to let the waters of a major river such as the Narmada run wasted to the sea" (1987). So too could have been Canadian politician Robert Bourassa: "Quebec is a vast hydroelectric plant in the bud, and every day millions of potential kilowatt-hours flow downstream and out to sea. What a waste!" (*Power from the North*, 1985). The radical singer Woody Guthrie was another who penned hymns to hydrological rearrangement, especially in the song commissions from Department of the Interior and the Bonneville Power Administration (e.g. *Grand Coulee Dam* which hailed this ecologically destructive construction as the "greatest wonder" of the world).

Such ideas of nature as nothing more than raw material, wasted if not exploited to satisfy human wants, were circulating inside the Soviet Union. In his *Soviet River*, for example, Leonid Leonov created a new kind of hero, engineer Uvadiiev. His mission is to put Mother Earth to work. "From the moment when Uvadiiev stepped on the bank, a challenge was cast at the River Sot ... and it seemed as though the very earth beneath his feet was his enemy." Another character, manager Sergei Potemkin, dreams of turning forests into newsprint.

In *Belomor* Maxim Gorky favourably depicts Stalin thus: "Before him lies a map of the region. Deserted shores. Remote villages. Virgin soil, covered with boulders. Primeval forests. Too much forest as a matter of fact; it covers the best soil. And swamps. The swamps are always crawling about,

making life dull and slovenly. Tillage must be increased. The swamps must be drained..." (quoted in Douglas Weiner's *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in the Soviet Union*, Indiana University, 1988). Trotsky was prepared to take to task false thinkers in the Soviet government and radical circles around it. He rightly opposed, for example, the vulgar ideas of Proletarian Art. But he does not seem to have thought it worthwhile to address anti-environment ideas that such authors were propagating.

The paradigm of industrial cornucopia Trotsky saw the fundamental problem facing humanity in terms of an economic system, capitalism, acting as a limitation on the forces of production which had been unleashed since the Industrial Revolution. His essential standpoint was a cornucopian one. Once capitalist fetters had been removed, nationalisation and state planning could be the midwife to a world of unlimited plenty. In *If America Should Go Communist* (1935), for example, he claims that under Communism "control over individual consumption – whether by money or administration – will no longer be necessary when there is more than enough of everything for everybody". He was far from being alone in this perception. Robert Tressell's famous novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), for example, envisaged a future with such abundance that people would simply take what they wanted from giant warehouses.

As a loyal Marxist, Trotsky saw industrialisation, albeit capitalist-led, as a massive step forward, breaking the chains of feudalism whilst creating the necessary preconditions for the subsequent advance to socialism (built on what Trotsky calls "the inevitable and progressive work of capitalism", Deutscher, p.348). Or, as he put it in *The Permanent Revolution* (1930), "industrialisation is the driving force of the whole of modern culture and by this token the *only* conceivable basis for socialism" (emphasis added).

Beyond those gains, capitalism, he famously argued, could only offer crisis and collapse. It was a system in its "death agony" as the Fourth International Manifesto put it. History was to show that capitalism had plenty of life. Indeed a long economic boom followed the ending of World War Two. The issue here is not Trotsky's erroneous diagnosis of the prospects for capitalism but rather his assumption that there should and could be a massive and sustained increases in throughput in the human economy. Thus his attack on Roosevelt's economic policies in the 1930s was partly based on what he saw as its small ambition. He argues thus: "on the basis of a unified socialist plan, the productive calculations could be considerably surpassed and a high comfortable standard of living, on the basis of an extremely short labour day assured to all the people" (*Marxism in Our*

*Time*, 1939).

Within that overall growth paradigm, he seems to have also believed in a globalised economy. In the same passage he praises capitalism for “having bound all parts of the world with economic ties”. After its overthrow (just around the corner!) Trotsky predicts that “the thoroughly rotted customs toll-gates will fall”. Such an economic system, no matter how carefully planned, would mean, by its very nature, more transportation and correspondingly more roads, railways, docks and airports ... as well as more fuel consumption to power the transportation systems.

The god that failed

In the late 1920s, breakneck expansion became the goal of economic planning in the USSR. The first Five Year Plan (1928), for example, sought or, rather, demanded a 111% increase in coal production, a 200% increase in iron production and a 335% increase in electricity supply (hence huge HEP projects such as the giant Dnieper dam). Giant cars were built in Moscow and tractor plants in Stalingrad, with enormous steel plants at Magnitogorsk, Gorky, and Kuznetsk.

These were just the highlights of a huge “battle for production”. Chemical and other plants making artificial fertiliser, synthetic rubber and man-made fibres sprouted in areas such as the Urals. Oil production in the Caucasus region was rapidly increased. Vast housing complexes were almost literally thrown up to give some shelter to the new workforce. Collectivisation similarly sought to transform agriculture (with the additional aim of destroying actual and potential oppositional elements in the countryside).

Trotsky’s main criticism was of the “zig-zag” nature of the then Stalin-Bukharin leadership and what he called “adventurism”, especially with regard to the scale and degree of violent coercion. Yet many of his comrades in the Left Opposition saw sufficient continuity between their programme and that of Stalin to make their peace with the Soviet leadership. Leading Left Oppositionist Christian Rakovsky noted in 1928 that Stalin had stolen “Trotsky’s clothes”. Other leaders such as Smilga and Smirnov now took a conciliatory position towards the Stalinist leadership. After all, their platform had denounced “the chronic lagging of industry, and also of transport, electrification and building, behind the demands and needs of the population, of public economy and the social system as a whole, holds as in a vice the entire economic turnover of the country”.

Trotsky was quick to savage anyone who dared to suggest that the USSR had ceased to be socialist (e.g. his *Defence of the Soviet Republic and the Opposition*, 1929). His criticism of Stalinist economic planning was more about means than ends. His other policies, namely increased export of primary goods through trade deals with what

he hoped would be left-wing governments in Europe, arguably would have put more pressure on the Soviet environment, especially her forests (industrialised clear-cutting became the norm there in the 1930s).

Numerous studies have recorded the horrendous ecological consequences of Soviet policy under Stalin and after.<sup>8</sup> The impact ranged from acute air and water pollution (including the once pristine Lake Baikal) to severe soil erosion, and deforestation. One result was that toxic contamination came to blight the country. Mercury pollution, for example, poisoned several waterways. The world’s worst nuclear disaster took place in 1957-8 at Kyshtym in the Urals while several Russian rivers have suffered routine radioactive pollution. Arguably the world’s single worst ecological disaster in modern times happened in Soviet central Asia – the destruction of the Aral Sea due to intensive irrigation projects.

The impact on other species has been disastrous as habitats have been destroyed or despoiled (loss of forests, wetland drainage, water diversion schemes etc). It is symbolised by the fate of bear and big cat populations (Siberian tigers etc) but many humble plants have become extinct or are endangered. Many fisheries have been destroyed due to pollution and disruption of spawning routes. By the mid-80s, some 23 species of mammals, 21 of birds, 7 of reptiles, 7 of fish, 9 of insects were listed under immediate threat of extinction (A. Borodin, *Krasnaya Kniga*, USSR, 1985). To be fair, in terms of direct threats to wildlife from hunting and poaching, the problem has got worse post-Stalin, though, from the start, corruption of state officials undermined genuine nature conservation efforts launched in the early Bolshevik period.

The human health costs have been terrible too. One legacy is that 40 percent of the Russian people live in areas where air pollutants are three to four times the maximum allowable levels. In St Petersburg, nearly half of the children have intestinal disorders caused by drinking contaminated water from what was once famously clean supply system.

It is interesting to note how little space has been devoted to these matters by left-wing critics of Stalin. They preferred to continue to debate whether the USSR was a degenerated or deformed workers’ state, a species of state capitalism or something called bureaucratic collectivism. Arguments about whether the bureaucracy was a class or a caste interested them more than what Soviet leaders and their planners were doing to the environment. There were some exceptions. The biologist Zhores Medvedev drew attention, amongst other things, to the Urals nuclear disaster and its cover-up. In the 1979 *The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union*, Boris Komarov (Ze’ev Wolfson) blew the whistle on assorted ecological crimes (he followed up with his 1994 study, *The Geography of Survival*:

### *Ecology in the Post-Soviet Era).*

The big issue is, of course, whether such consequences were the inevitable by-product of the model of economic development pursued by Stalin or sought by Trotsky and the Left/United Opposition groupings. Poor planning and inadequate management combined with wasteful and faulty production methods partly explain the havoc wreaked on the Soviet environment by economic development. But the root cause lies in inherent limits to all physical growth.

#### Limits to growth

Debate about “limits-to-growth” is bedevilled by language. It is perhaps best to drop the word “growth” and instead use “throughput”. The real issue, then, is total throughput of physical space, energy, raw materials and information in the human economy, with all stages of a given “life cycle” taken into account. Accounting thus must cover exploration and extraction, refining, manufacture, distribution and consumption right through to final disposal. Transportation of people and artefacts occurs at most stages and so too must be taken into the total reckoning.

Such a perspective shifts the argument away from vague and subjective terms like “living standards”, “quality of life”, and, that particularly fuzzy concept, “human development”. In reality, there is no escaping biogeophysical realities, no matter in what “non-material” ways progress is couched. Even such personal self-improvement as greater music appreciation requires physical things like instruments, CD players and concert halls. An intangible like “privacy” still depends on some (limited) private physical space, if not walls and/or screens of vegetation. The most ascetic community of monks still needs some basic things. Certainly one can inhabit a world of seemingly limitless imagination but not without worldly goods like food and water, which, like all things in the real world, are subject to the limits. There is no ecological free lunch and that truth becomes clearer when the whole picture of production, consumption and disposal is taken into account.

It might have been noted that “information” has been added to the ingredients of economic activity. This is usually seen as limitless by those who concede (often reluctantly) that there might just be limits to, say, oil supply. Certainly human knowledge has exploded exponentially in recent centuries. Yet information needs physical receptacles to be used. Our brains seem prone to “overload”, while person-to-person and group communication has its own constraints that also limit the circulation and usefulness of information, as humorously demonstrated in the old game of Chinese whispers.

Bureaucracy adds its own delays and distortions to the generation and application of “knowledge”. No wonder the old adage has it that a cam-

el is a horse designed by a committee. Given the high expectations placed on planning by Trotsky and many others, its potential perhaps ought to be treated with a bit more caution. Computers might seem to transcend such limits on storage and processing, yet their manufacture, operation and disposal consume a great deal of energy and raw material, some of them very hazardous. The fast rising mountain of “silicon trash” is but one sign that computerisation is not free from ecological constraints. The quality of computer-based “knowledge” is similarly limited.<sup>9</sup> Even when it helps with know-how, it sheds less light on “know-why”.

Information technology is, then, subject to biophysical limits just like all other specific technologies and general land usage. These constraints are inherent, absolute and insuperable. That bald statement needs to be qualified by the rider that there are seldom, if ever, precise boundaries and exact timescales, given the complex interactions within ecosystems and the possibility of trade-offs (i.e. more resources of one kind made available at the cost of the diminution of others). Nonetheless, the fundamental reality of life is finitude.

#### The outer limits

Life on Earth is constrained by what might be called the 3 E's – the Earth and its finite size, Entropy with its penalties on any energy and raw material conversion, and, last but not least, Ecology with the constraining checks and balances that sustain ecosystems. In a geologically finite, entropy bound and ecologically interconnected system, sustaining more of one thing must mean sustaining less of something else. Thus the finite geology of the Earth limits not only the amount of energy and raw materials available for economic activity but also the environment's capacity to absorb the waste generated by production and consumption.

These losses from the economy to the “sink” of air, land and water are not simply the product of bad management but rather the product of the basic laws of energy and matter, in particular the entropy law. Against these constraints, there is no technological appeal. According to the entropy law, every process, from the generation of electricity to the refining of raw materials, inevitably must create wastes, as high quality energy and matter are disordered and dispersed. No-one has made a car, for example, that can be powered from its exhaust fumes or lit a fire from yesterday's ashes. These entropic barriers are further compounded by ecological limits.

Ecology is the third external limit. The interaction of abiotic and biotic components of both specific biomes and the global ecosystem as a whole is the foundation for every aspect of human existence. Yet most people see the human-created

economy as something above and apart from the rest of nature or, at the most, reluctantly concede that economics and environment are interdependent. In reality, ecology is the basis for the human economy. The latter is utterly and unavoidably dependent on the former.

Ecosystems and the “services” they provide are not just the “means” of production (i.e. specific resources without which there would be no factories, offices, homes and so forth) but also the conditions for economic and any other activity. The latter point might become clearer if one compares difficulties of survival on the moon with the habitability of the Earth. Like all species, humans depend on others for our existence. At the very least, we need them to produce the oxygen we breathe, absorb the carbon dioxide we exhale, decompose our sewage, provide our food, maintain the fertility of the soil we cultivate. We similarly depend on certain biogeochemical cycles (water, carbon, nitrogen, etc) as well as continual inputs of energy (it might be noted that a degree of “global warming” is rather a good thing, though not its anthropogenic forcing beyond a certain sustainable point).

The planet’s tree cover highlights what “life-support” means. Forests act as buffers against excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and stabilise climate; they enhance rainfall; they protect soil and act as sponges against excess downhill flow of water; they purify and cool the air; they absorb noise; they provide habitats for an incredible variety of wildlife; they convert solar energy into a host of specific resources of which lumber is just one ... and, to many eyes, they are beautiful. Wetlands provide a further illustration. They are nature’s kidneys, processing the nutrients in waterways. Furthermore, they protect shorelines, recharge ground water, moderate flooding and climate whilst, of course, providing habitat for many other species, including, in the USA, over 180 endangered species.

All living species, of course, affect their surroundings. Beavers, for instance, create dams across rivers. But their impoundments scarcely change hydrological systems or eliminate other species in the manner of human interventions in the water cycle. Today the scale and kind of human impact has gone beyond what can be sustained. The Earth’s life-support capacities are, then, being reduced in toto by human additions (not just individual pollutants but a complex cocktail of interacting contaminants), abstractions (soil erosion, deforestation, wetland drainage, direct species elimination) and other alterations such as changing the course of waterways) to ecosystems. Thus the further “natural” large-biomass, diverse and multiple-age forests are replaced by single-species, even-aged and short-rotation plantations or are simply cleared, the more these priceless and irreplaceable life-support functions are lost. Ecology is, then,

the third constraint on human activity.

Ecological foundation of all value

The nature of the above limits has been clouded by the way debate over the human-environment issue has developed. Clarity has been lost in due course. In the early 1970s, there was a rash of media speculation about resources running out. However, the real environmental crisis is not so much the absolute shortage in the near future of specific resources, though, already, there are signs of conflicts to come over the sheer availability of sufficient water in some regions and of certain key minerals. In the short term, greater efficiency and the substitution of more abundant resources for scarcer ones mean that factories are not going to run out of raw materials.

The more formidable resource barrier is the depletion that would result from attempts to spread across all countries the lifestyles prevalent in regions like western Europe. If the rest of Asia, for example, were to achieve the same ratio of cars to people as Japan (not high compared with America), the number of cars in the world would double. Yet the earth is choking on present, let alone projected, traffic levels. The fundamental ecological problem is, however, the side-effects of resource extraction, processing, and manufacture as well as impacts of consuming and discarding those products. limited waste absorption capacities of the environment constitute a formidable limit to growth.

Furthermore, it is vital to distinguish different threats to the Earth’s “health”. The danger from specific pollutants (addition of harmful substances to ecosystems) is compounded by the hazards of environmental degradation and simplification (removal of ecological richness and diversity of lifeforms and landscapes). Seemingly “clean” activities – clear-cutting of forests, dams, tillage, the paving over of land etc – can be just as, if not more, damaging as “dirty” ones. Yet there is a very strong tendency to focus one-dimensionally on the problem of pollution, overlooking the sometimes greater dangers from soil erosion and other adverse changes to the land and waterways.

The fundamental ecological limit, however, is at the same time the very reason for nature’s resilience. Any system, be it a human body or an ecosystem, uses a lot of the resources available simply to maintain and repair itself. The surplus yield is necessarily small if the “producer” is to function sustainably. The corollary of this “number one rule of life” is that the Earth’s life-support systems can only cater for limited demands, be it in terms of energy supply, food production, or any other human need.

Ecology would seem to defy the “entropic” losses discussed above. After all, the Earth is still here and, down the millennia, life has evolved in more complex and diverse ways. Put simply:

things have got more ordered, contrary to the laws of thermodynamics. It has managed to absorb and transcend freezing ice ages, gigantic volcanic eruptions and even the impact of meteors from outer space. At one level, the Earth and the mix of abiotic and biotic elements that compose it does seem to transcend entropy. This happens because evolution has fine-tuned ecological systems and life within, making them resilient. Individual species come and go but, overall, life has continued to flourish. Thus nature “heals” land devastated by volcanoes, quickly recovering it with vegetation.

More generally, the “waste” outputs from one part of the ecological system become the life-giving inputs to other flora and fauna, creating a level of total efficiency that human technology cannot match. Complex checks and balances usually prevent any one part of the system growing out of proportion to the rest and thus threatening the whole. Thus not only is the dissipation of energy and raw materials counteracted but the tendency to disorder and disintegration is checked.

Seen in this light, processes like photosynthesis are not “inefficient” as some people, usually economists, suggest. The Earth’s living systems take what is necessary. A more “efficient” capture of incoming solar energy would trigger disruptive growth to the detriment of the whole system and therefore be highly “inefficient”. Similarly it might seem as if many species play no vital and irreplaceable role (thus can be safely eliminated). Yet it is the presence of plenty of “spare parts” and other possible lines of development that, again, has enabled life to flourish over time.

So ecosystems could be said to overcoming entropy, generating, instead, what might be called “negentropy”. It is for this reason, above all others, that it is fallacious to think it possible to turn a living Earth into a planet totally covered by human artefacts. Trotsky could not have been more wrong when he claimed that “the machine is not in opposition to the earth”. The living Earth has a degree of self-order and regenerative capability that “dead” machinery cannot match. Actually entropy can never be overcome. The Earth itself depends upon external input of solar energy as the driveshaft that enables all other systems to keep functioning. Crudely: no Sun, no living Earth.

#### Some implications

These issues are extremely complex, though, fortunately, there is a strong literature on them.<sup>10</sup> But some points need to be underlined since they are widely misunderstood. One has been mentioned above, namely that “clean” is not necessarily “green”. Hydroelectricity, for example, has, to date, done far more damage than nuclear power (though that situation could literally change tomorrow, such is the potential hazard of what is,

in any case, a finite and in other ways highly polluting energy source). Irrigation is another “clean” activity, yet amongst its many unsustainable impacts has been greatly increased salinisation in warmer regions. So too is the deliberate and accidental introduction of “alien” plants and animals, but its impacts have often been disastrous for indigenous species. Indeed that “greenest” of land use, the lawn, is often a virulent form of ecological cancer, not least in the form of golf courses.

“Renewability” is also not the same thing as sustainability. Harvesting from large-scale biomass plantations might be replaceable with new plantings but, in toto, such land use would be ecologically disastrous. Indeed it is vital to see things as a whole. This is why talk of “green cars” is such nonsense. A large part of the unsustainable impact of car usage is actually at the manufacturing stage. Other negative impacts come from the roads, parking lots and other infrastructure that solar electric or any other kind of vehicle would still need. Such observations also apply to rail transport (whose land consumption, power demands and very limited capacity to absorb people and goods switched from the roads is often overlooked by alternative transport buffs).

It is essential to judge things in terms of total life cycles and net efficiency, not just what one worker produces or how much of a particular thing (be it wheat, eggs, logs, oil, bricks, refrigerators, or garden gnomes) is yielded. Overall, sustainable yield will be low output in the short-term, even if longer lasting than the output from today’s superficially productive farms and factories. Claims that nuclear power is sustainable or an answer to global overwarming can only be seen to be fraudulent if judged in terms of “cradle-to-grave” costs and impacts.

Mention has been made of golf. It is important to note that many leisure activities are just as unsustainable as manufacturing. Too often ecological damage is seen in term of “smokestack economies”. In actuality, *Homo Rapiens* is nothing if not wanton in the havoc it wreaks. Skiing has trashed many mountain sides while much water pollution is created by leisure craft. Hospitals have been a significant source of toxic wastes while crematoria add their own contribution to total pollution loads.

Finally, it must be stressed that these issues are about the real wealth of nations: a stable climate, an intact ozone layer, fertile soil, potable water and so forth. It is not about money. Cash is merely a token, a claim on the goods and services fashioned from the Earth’s specific resources and general life-support systems. Yet most Marxists are as guilty as conventional economists of monetary fetishism, failing to start from the productive forces embodied in land, sea and air. Typically, then, Marxists tot up the money squandered on, say,

armaments and simply assume that it, the money, is the means to build more houses and hospitals; diabolical materialism indeed.

### Overshoot

The above observations are central to the concept of limits-to-growth and to what over the course of the 20th century has become a general crisis of human “overshoot”. The scale of human activity is now progressively decreasing the self-renewing, self-regulating and self-repairing capacities unique to ecosystems. It does so in many ways: each and every time more old-growth forests are felled, more monocultures planted, bigger herds of domesticated animals grazed, more wetlands drained, more waterways channelled and dammed, more mines dug, and more land buried beneath concrete and tarmac. Sometimes, the destruction happens on a large scale, for example the destruction of rainforests to make way for cattle ranches and mines. More often, however, it is the cumulative consequence of a myriad of otherwise insignificant developments, from new housing estates and hospitals to new marinas and ski resorts.

For many people, however, “limits” are synonymous with oppressive restraints. Actually, it provides a positive framework for decision-making. It provides guidelines for long-lasting satisfaction and fulfilment. The various limits to growth should be seen as brakes and crash barriers. Operational and behavioural limits are central to the processes of self-regulation that prevent excess and failure. Any system – plant, animal, community, institution, machine or ecosystem – must have limits to its functioning. Otherwise it would cease to be an ordered entity and fail. To quote the great ecologist, Eugene Odum: “growth beyond the optimum is cancer.”

As the “steady-state” economist Herman Daly once put it, overdevelopment occurs when human numbers and artefacts grow “so large to the total environment that they obstruct the natural ecological processes which form the biophysical foundations of wealth. [They] become a cancer which kills the total organism”. Global over-warming, water shortages, eroded soil, depleted fisheries are all but symptoms of that lethal sickness. Overdevelopment is the only appropriate term to describe a situation in which just one single species, humankind, has taken over some 40% of net primary productivity (some estimates put the figure higher). In other words, so much of the real economic cake is being consumed by *Homo Rapiens* that, if not reduced, it can only destroy the very “bakery” on which all living, not just economic activity, depends.

A truly sustainable economy will only cater for limited demands. The fundamental reason is this: any system, be it a human body or an ecosystem, uses a lot of the resources available simply to maintain and repair itself. The surplus yield is

necessarily small if the “producer” is to function sustainably. The introduction of high-yielding hybrids, for example, means that more is taken out of the soil (necessitating more fertiliser use), more water is required (leading to expensive irrigation and possibly problems of water-logging and salinisation) and resistance to pests and disease is reduced (with attendant need for more biocides).

Forestry illustrates why long-term sustainability is about, as the American writer Tom Bender put it, “sharing smaller pies”. To conserve species like the spotted owl in areas like Oregon, sufficient old trees and snags must be left. To protect soil and water, trees have to be cut selectively, maintaining a largely continuous canopy. To maintain soil fertility, sufficient dead trees have to be left to decay. To protect wildlife and human health, pesticides must be prohibited. To conserve employment, mechanisation must be limited. These and other criteria rule out certain practices and permit others. A truly sustainable economics, then, would be that economic framework which makes such a forestry possible. From such system, we would get a sustainable and high quality yield of timber – but, in the short-term (i.e. decades), it would be greatly lower in volume than the output of plantation “tree farms”, quite inadequate to feed today’s giant pulp mills, for instance. Again, the message is “think shrink”, not dream of more.

This orientation is not an attempt to “pull up the ladder” so that the poor cannot join the rich. The socialist expansionist strategy, advocated by Trotskyists and non-Trotskyists alike, is in the long run, pie-in-the-sky. In fact, abandonment of the goal of global affluence offers the best hope for those being crushed under the wheels of industrial expansion. Across the “Third World”, outside the citadels of western-style luxury, the people with secure food supplies, clean water, social stability and a basic sense of identity tend to be those living in regions not yet harnessed to the treadmill of development.

In short: Trotsky’s dream of universal affluence for all is an infantile disorder. It is well nigh impossible to even make crude estimates of what might be a sustainable society. It is easier and more useless to spotlight and try to stop activities that are unsustainable. But a rough guess might be that a total human population of around 1 billion might be sustained in a satisfactory degree of comfort and conviviality. The contrast with the current circumstances needs no comment, though it should be noted that with smaller size of population each person’s voice gains extra weight. In other words, real social democracy is also potentially greater.

### Flawed fixes

Radical critics of the dominant social order like Trotsky often see the magic wand of technological wizardry as the means to bring into existence the

world of material abundance deemed to be the necessary basis for the abolition of exploitation and oppression. But life is not so simple. As Paul Ehrlich and John Holdren once observed, “technological rabbits” pulled out of the magic hat of science usually have “large appetites and leave noxious droppings”. Such “fixes” either fail to solve the original problem, create new problems of their own or, at the very best, provide only a temporary respite before on-going growth in human numbers and artefacts swallows up any savings in resource consumption and pollution levels.

To be fair, there are some specific fixes like energy conservation and other resource-saving measures that can significantly reduce the human “footprint” on Planet Earth. So too would a switch to a less meat-centred diet. Some basic fixes like clean running water and adequate sanitation can dramatically improve human health. Indeed a few day’s rest is a wonderful fix for many ailments. A localisation of production could significantly cut the impacts from vehicle manufacture and the operation of transport systems. Many more examples will spring to mind of quite simple steps that yield positive gains. But once easily available savings have been made and other such alterations effected, limits quickly reassert themselves.

Trotsky probably would have replied to the ecological argument that it is the drive to make profits that pushes things to breaking point. Conversely the replacement of commodity production by production for social use would (or, more precisely, might) ease the pressure. In many cases, he would have had a valid point. Yet the fundamental problem is not abolished. Usage is a separate issue. The fundamental problem resides in the actual production, conversion, distribution, use and disposal of capital and consumer goods. Motives and uses are another matter, whatever their role in shaping human economic and non-economic activity.

Take the human diet, for example. Demand for meat products is currently soaring. In Trotsky’s socialist society, one might imagine continued popular demand for meat and fish products that the economy would be then planned to satisfy. It would remain a ruinous way of eating. According to University of Chicago researchers, for example, an average meat burger consumer creates the equivalent of 1.5 tonnes more CO<sub>2</sub> every year than the standard vegan one when one product “life cycle” is set against the other.

Meat production is also a massive resource depleter. It takes 7kg of feedstuff input for 1 kg of beef (the ratio is worse for lean cuts of meat). Meat production also consumes huge quantities of water and oil or its by-products. On average, it takes 9,680 litres of water for 1kg of beef compared to 1,790 litres to grow 1kg of wheat. Between 1,100 to 4,400 gallons of water are used per live weight ton of slaughtered animal in the USA, for example.

American agriculture consumes 40% of the water used whereas all domestic water consumption by private individuals is less than 5% of the total of water consumed in the country. In global terms, meat-eaters consume the equivalent of about 5,000 litres of water a day compared to the 1,000-2,000 litres typically used by people on vegetarian diets.

Meat production further consumes land. Over 90% of the agricultural land area in the United States, over 50% of the total land area of the country, is devoted to livestock rearing and meat production. The link between meat production and deforestation in particular is well established. In Mexico, for example, 37 million acres of forest have been destroyed since 1987 to provide additional grazing land for cattle. Much of what cows eat comes from soya by-products whose production is now a major force for tropical forest clearance. On present trends (2005) 16 million more square hectares of savannahs and 4 million more square hectares of tropical forest will be destroyed by the combined effects of more soya growing and cattle ranching. It should be noted that genetically modified crops figure prominently here. The production of soybeans in Argentina expanded from 9,500 hectares in the early 1970s to 5.9 million in 1996, 10.3 million in 2000-1 and 14.1 million in 2003-4, almost all of which is GM (some estimates are as high as 97%).

It would be unfair to pick on cows and beef production. It should not be forgotten how many environments have been worn away by sheep and goats. John Muir rightly called them “four-legged locusts”. Artificially high populations of deer, kept for the entertainment of “slob hunters” seeking easy kills, also cause great damage. There is surely no need to underline the even higher levels of resource consumption and effluent that inevitably accompany dense populations of pigs, hens and other creatures kept on “factory farms”.

Slurry from farm livestock as well as stockyard washdowns, slaughter, evisceration, boning, rendering and so forth also create massive water pollution. Refrigeration not only requires large amounts of electricity (thus depleting fossil fuels and adding more greenhouses gases) but also is a source of CFC loss to the atmosphere (with consequent damage to the protective ozone layer). Many of these impacts are shared by fish harvesting and processing, with added safety risks to workers on trawler fleets.

Moral and health considerations apart, vegetarian or, at least, a very low meat and fish diet would reduce grazing (resulting in less erosion and methane generation), fishing (reduced depletion of fisheries and destruction of other species in trawl nets), crop cultivation (less soil nutrient loss and erosion, more land for wildlife habitat etc), fertiliser usage (less eutrophication) etc. Yet the scale of current consumption levels means that the impact of meat consumption is only one part

of the food equation. After all, most of the increased soya cultivation, whose disastrous effects have just been noted, is for oil, much of which ends in basic household products like mayonnaise (the same arguments hold for palm oil).

In other words, values and lifestyle choices remain the fundamental issues, ones which Trotsky at best left “for the future”. It may be remembered that Marx himself wrote very little about the nature of a socialist/communist society. But it is silly indeed to assume that on the morrow of the long awaited revolution, the mass of people would suddenly change the habits that their leaders have done nothing to discourage.

Certainly greater regulation and planning of the economy in the future may make conversion of the production/consumption mix easier (e.g. switch to less meat-centred diets). But, today, the average consumer, certainly in richer countries, is perfectly free to transform today his/her lifestyle. Poverty is no excuse, given that low meat diets are not only healthier but also cheaper, as can be seen on most restaurant price lists. Of course withdrawal of the enormous subsidies to the livestock industry would encourage such change. If just water use by the industry were not subsidised by American taxpayers, the cost of a common hamburger would be over \$30 while the cost of one pound of beefsteak would be well over \$80, a massive incentive to eat less meat (and be healthier, not just reduce environmental damage). Avoidance of such issues does not help their resolution.

#### Capitalism and the causes of ecological crisis

Of course, like many others, Trotsky was aware of the downside of “progress”, especially the way the new layer of factory workers suffered in the blighted cities and towns created by industrialisation. However, as noted above, he blamed these on the capitalist form of organisation, not the productive forces themselves, as do all faithful Marxists. Yet many of these problems predate capitalism or have no necessary connection to it or indeed any particular social and economic order.

Plato, for example, bemoaned deforestation in ancient Greece while, across in China, the seemingly innocent art of calligraphy and associated charcoal burning deforested huge areas. Back further in pre-history, essentially classless societies drove many species into extinction. In more recent times, De Toqueville pointed out how the destruction of North America’s fauna and flora by white people went way beyond any rational calculation of private profit, stemming, he argued, from an almost pathological fear of the “wilder-ness” they found. If anything, it was a capitalist desire to husband resources under Teddy Roosevelt’s administration that introduced some modicum of environmental protection.

The various development bodies listed above

are public agencies, not private capitalist firms. To some extent, their work subsidises individual capitalists such as ranchers, timber mill owners, fossil fuel corporations and the like. Yet much of their work has been opposed by capitalist interests and done in the name, rightly or wrongly, of the public good. In other words, their unsustainable practices reflect something deeper – anti-environmental values and goals that have no necessary connection to any particular economic system.

Some of our biggest problems in fact stem not from capitalist profiteering but from more benign motivations. Innovations such as high-yielding hybrid plants and CFCs were the product of scientists working for what they conceived to be the common good. Indeed, there are countless examples of bad consequences resulting from good intentions. For example, tourism, which is now fast degrading areas that have escaped the worst ravages of industrialised farming and factory development, is driven by the fact that millions simply want to sun themselves on Mediterranean beaches or ski down Alpine slopes. The destruction it is causing is primarily the result of the scale and nature of these activities, not simply because it is managed by capitalist tourist operators.

Look at the ugly and unsustainable urban redevelopments that took place in Britain after 1945. Many were the product of high-minded public planners and architects (“from Bauhaus to our house” as Tom Wolfe once put it). They were not the work of capitalist entrepreneurs. In the same period, quite stunning reconstruction took place in towns and cities as diverse as St. Malo in France, Freiburg in Germany and Warsaw in Poland under quite different political and economic systems. It is vulgar indeed to coach explanations of such activity in terms of just private profit.

The point is not to minimise the opprobrium rightly heaped on transnational corporations and assorted other profiteers. Rather it is stress the need for a fuller picture. Central to a more rounded analysis is the concept of “The Tragedy of the Commons”. It spotlights the cumulative effect of individual actions and the great harm they cause, no matter how well-intended or harmless in themselves. There are many examples of the dynamic, especially in today’s anonymous, mass societies, where the sanctions exercised in small-scale communities upon the actions of their members no longer apply.

For all kinds of reasons – convenience, laziness, comfort, entertainment, safety, security etc – things are done whose bottom line is resource depletion, pollution, and the extermination of wildlife. A driving force in overpopulation, for example, has been humanitarian attempts to reduce infant mortality, extend life spans and overcome limits to child-bearing. It would be perverse indeed to see such efforts as merely a capitalist plot to increase the number of consumers. At the more mundane

level of energy conservation in buildings, many people, especially women working at night, are glad to see lights wastefully left on in empty corridors, simply because they feel safer.

Take a small example: the modern kettle. Most people use them without a second's thought. Yet kettles account for almost a third of the electricity used by cooking appliances. Some 7m were sold last year. In 2006 it was estimated that the nationwide rush for fast boiling and keep-warm kettles would increase UK carbon dioxide emissions by 220,000 tonnes a year. The problem is not one individual household but countless individuals using such devices. When they all do so at the same time (e.g. during half-time in a televised Cup Final), there is huge pressure put on the national grid by the mass simultaneous decision to have a cup of tea or coffee. It might be added that if these viewers are watching one of the new plasma TV screens, they are helping to create electricity demand equal to two nuclear power stations.<sup>11</sup>

Actually the obsession that gripped Trotsky and his followers, namely the search for signs that capitalism was about to reach its "death agony" (i.e. a return to a catastrophic 30s-style slump) may have helped to blind them to the real contradiction of capitalism. It is in the very nature of the system to seek further growth. Thus even recessions function as a "clearing house" before the imperative to expand again reasserts itself. The competitive drive to increase profits, including the compulsion to produce and sell more to pay off interest on borrowed monies, forces all would-be "players" in the system to expand. Given the biogeophysical limits to growth, capitalism is an inherently unsustainable form of economic organisation. This is the deepest anti-capitalist argument and the biggest one in favour of some form of planned economy. It is here that Trotskyism really missed the ideological boat.

#### Overpopulation

Trotsky only seems to have made odd passing comments on the population issue. In *Our Revolution* (i.e. 1905), for example, he criticises the Tsarist autocracy for "inhibiting population growth" though this seems more of a throwaway remark. At other times, when discussing the Soviet economy, he makes rather vague references to "rural overpopulation" (*Vital Questions for the German Proletariat*, 1932) and "agrarian overpopulation" (*On China*, 1927).

It would seem safe to assume that, following Marx himself, Trotsky used such terms in simply a relative sense. At a given level of technological development and in specific economic situations, there could be said to be overpopulation. Conversely, change in those circumstances would dispel the spectre of excess human numbers. It is hard to imagine that Trotsky would have conceded that human population growth might lead to a general

state of overshoot.

One would imagine that Trotsky would have echoed Friedrich Engels who did not hesitate to claim the progress of science "is just as limitless and at least as rapid as that of population.... We are forever secure from the fear of overpopulation". At the most he might have admitted that population growth could become an issue in the extreme long-term. For all intents and purposes, he would have most likely seen the issue as a smokescreen used by defenders of inequality to draw attention away from inequitable ownership of land and other resources as well as inadequate development of productive forces.

Yet the key dimension to the ecological crisis is not "bad" technology nor "maldevelopment"/"maldistribution". It is human numbers. Given that mere survival depends upon a certain level of consumption of water, food, heat, and shelter, it is perfectly reasonable to base discussion of the issue in quantitative terms, although in actuality the vast majority of people want more than just the basic necessities. But those very basics, just like the trappings of more affluent lifestyles, all come from the environment whose capacity to supply them as well as absorb waste by-products is not infinite.

When Trotsky reached the age of 21 (1900), the total human population was, on the lower estimate, 1,550 million. When he died, the world's population had reached some 2,300 million people. Thus, in his adult lifetime, 750 million extra members were added to what, quite appropriately, is called the human race. By mid-summer 2005, a mere 65 years after he was assassinated, the figure had shot up to 6,450 million. In this short period, less than the Bible's three score and ten years, there was an increase of well over 4 billion extra people to feed, water, shelter, clothe, educate, employ, entertain and so forth.

Some 20% of all humans in the last six thousand years are alive today and their number continues to increase (see the US Census Bureau Popclock website for the current figure). Over the next 60 seconds, the number will go up by 150 (births over deaths), though there are, of course, huge regional disparities. In some countries, notably the USA, inward migration is a large part of overall growth.

To say that there is no difference in environmental (as well as social and economic effects) between a population of 1,550 million, 2,300 million or 6,450 million is to say that numbers do not count. Yet that is precisely what those who ignore the population dimension do say, and they could not be more mistaken since every extra member of the total population puts additional demands on environmental systems whose capacity to cope is decreasing.

As noted, most people want more than the bare necessities of life. They want push-of-a-button

energy, turn-of-a-tap water, flush toilet systems, comfortable and spacious accommodation, different clothes and shoes, labour-saving gadgetry, primary and at least secondary education, health care from cradle to grave, rapid means of transport, varied sources of entertainment and much more, including somewhere to be buried or cremated. The effects of a greater head count are, then, multiplied by higher per capita consumption, with an even heavier burden placed on those wilting ecosystems.

As various quotes throughout this piece reflect, Trotsky advocated higher per capita consumption, including, as we shall see, more cars and cigars, while not taking a stand on family planning and the number of consuming "bodies". It might be noted that revolutionaries like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Emma Goldman did support birth control (though more from a women's liberation perspective). So too did Margaret Sanger, avowed socialist and author of material like *Will Birth Control Help the Cause of Labor?* and founder of the American Birth Control League (whose questionable attitude to eugenics went further than Trotsky). Thus there were activists in left-wing circles who were raising the issue, albeit for non-ecological reasons, but Trotsky, like most Marxists, was looking the other way.

These are intensely personal matters yet they are also ones pregnant with social and environmental consequences. To be crudely blunt: Trotsky fathered four children. In effect, he was saying that the planet could not only cope with existing human numbers but twice their number. Of course, from a human perspective and given the cruel fate of all his family, this seems a harsh thing to say. But as the singer Paul Simon once wrote in his lyrics to *Born at the Right Time*, "the planet groans, every time it registers another birth".

Hans Magnus Enzensberger has argued these points well. He notes, for example "the connection between the ease with which totalitarian regimes were able to implement their murderous schemes and the population explosion with its ensuing homelessness and landlessness. It is as if the value they place on the lives of others depreciates as the birth rate increases". He continues: "Joblessness, homelessness, inner-city decay, refugee camps, all prove that there are simply too many of us. And we react psychotically by striking out in all directions. The tendency is at work everywhere."

Last but not least, he observes why population figures leave so many people cold. "Statistics, whether referring to the starving, the unemployed or refugees, express everything in millions. Such numbers paralyse the imagination...." While it is possible to respond to individual, limited suffering, "the terror of big numbers is without eyes. Empathy breaks down before such excessive demand, and reason is made aware of its impotence".

Of course there will be many who rush to

point out that poor people often parent more children to have more hands with which to work the fields or simply beg. The American scientist Louis Pascal has addressed this dilemma. "In such a situation, I myself would most carefully refrain from having children. There are at least three reasons.... The wish to avoid inflicting so great a pain upon myself; the wish to avoid inflicting so great a pain upon my spouse and the surviving children; and the wish to avoid inflicting death upon my child. Between ten and twenty million people starve to death every year. If you take the smaller figure and make the ridiculous assumption that it will not get any larger in the future, then you get the figure of 500 million deaths in the next 50 years. But it will get larger because in 35 years there will be twice as many people trying to find food in a world which today is so overpopulated that half of all human beings are hungry."

To repeat, numbers do count. In the words of Anne and Paul Ehrlich, "individuals who oppose mild and humane restrictions on reproduction now are encouraging an enormous further loss of both human freedom and human lives in the future.... Anyone who is fighting the provision of people with contraception and getting family sizes down is simply fighting very hard to get millions or hundreds of millions to die early, in very nasty ways".

#### Trotsky on technology

There are two common ideas about technology. One is the almost religious faith that technology is the answer, believers thinking that social and environmental problems can be made to disappear simply by waving the magic wand of applied science (the "technofix" mentality). The second is the belief that technology is simply a neutral tool, its impacts dependent upon the identity and purposes of its controllers.

Trotsky combined both. He would surely have agreed with John Molyneux in his "Teach Yourself Marxism" column (*Socialist Worker*, 17 October 1987) that "it is not industry, but capitalist industry that destroys the environment". Trotsky sees technology becoming unbounded in the hands of "liberated mankind" (speech quoted below). In his Copenhagen speech of 1932, *In Defence of October*, he claims, for example, that "the hour is not far when science will easily solve the task of the alchemists, and turn manure into gold and gold into manure". He viewed technology and its by-products in terms of social use versus private profit. In actuality, armoured cars and ambulances still clock up the same thermodynamic and ecological bills, regardless of their different human value. In other words, Trotsky lacked any ecological understanding of technology.

In terms of specific technologies, Trotsky had some perhaps surprising views. From his remarks on nuclear science, it seems fair to deduce that he

would have been a supporter of nuclear power programmes. In *Radio, Science, Technique and Society* (1926), for example, he predicts with evident enthusiasm: “the atom contains within itself a mighty hidden force, and the greatest task of physics consists of pumping out this energy ... atomic energy, which will also become the basic motive force.”

To be fair, this was years before the many downsides of nuclear energy became clearly known. Yet there is more than a whiff of technological hubris here (later in the same piece he talks of “unbounded technical possibilities”) and correspondingly scant appreciation of what today is called the “precautionary principle”. At the end of the 19th century scientists such as the American physicist Elihu Thomson were warning of the risk from X-rays. By 1925 the idea of tolerance levels and exposure dose was being discussed by the American Roentgen Ray Society. In 1934 scientist Marie Curie was to die from leukaemia brought on by her contact with radioactive substances. More sober reflection, even in 1926, could have told Trotsky that there is a limit to how much uranium can be extracted from the Earth, regardless of other dangers posed by its mining and milling. An ecological perspective would also have advised extreme caution about the creation of elements not found in nature, in this case plutonium.

The ecology of urbanism, by contrast, was a subject on which Trotsky commented indirectly. Though the use of fire and the creation of farmland might be said to be the most revolutionary of technological developments, the creation of built environments, leading to the modern megalopolis, stands in greatest contrast to non-human nature. Trotsky made only passing comments about urbanisation. In his tribute to the work of Marx and Engels, *Ninety Years of the Communist Manifesto* (1937), he does not note any failings with its programme. One is germane at this point, the demand to abolish “all the distinction between town and country by a more equitable distribution of the populace over the country”. This is of course what is properly called urban sprawl, the biggest destroyer of productive farmland in countries like the USA and, indirectly, a major cause of greenhouse gas generation due to the need for greater travel.

Another area of applied design, textiles and fashion, illustrates the limits of an “anything-goes” perspective. Related industries do immense harm to ecological systems (pesticides in cotton cultivation, overgrazing by sheep and other animals used for wool, fur and hides, manufacture of man-made fibres, use of industrial dyes, bleaches and other treatments, packaging, post-consumer waste etc). Cheap clothes are intimately connected to sweatshop labour as well. Thus, there is a need to spell out in detail criteria for what is ecologically and socially appropriate in clothes manufacture –

source of raw materials, production methods, design for adaptability, durability and reparability of the products, use of recycled materials and so forth.

Similar criteria need to be used in construction of the built environment (e.g. as in the German Baubiologie architectural movement) and all other design. It can also be applied to land use planning. Of course comparative life cycle and impact assessment of one method or ingredient against another is far from easy. But at least it sets an agenda. At the least it offers hope of something more sustainable than purely subjective choices, commercial criteria and, last but not least, decisions made on the basis of “class analysis” (or as Trotsky put it, “the social conditions in historic human society are, first of all, the conditions of class affiliation”).

On farming

Agriculture has, so far, changed the face of the Earth more than any other technological system. The unsustainable impact of large-scale, heavily mechanised and chemical-intensive farms was already being attacked, especially after the American dust bowl storms. Critics included ecologists like Paul Sears. Indeed George Marsh was warning farmers in the USA about their practices as early as 1847. More sustainable alternatives were being canvassed in the inter-war years by pioneers such as Rudolf Steiner (Germany) Masanobu Fukuoka (Japan) and Lady Eve Balfour (UK). The American agronomist F.H. King and British agricultural advisor in India Sir Albert Howard were also demonstrating that traditional practices had many advantages over seemingly more “progressive” industrialised agriculture.

Trotsky seems to have been oblivious to such work. He generally endorsed farm collectivisation, though, to be fair, there is no evidence to suggest that he endorsed Stalin’s brutal methods. In *If America Should Go Communist*, he talks about “gigantic farm enterprises”. Similarly his *Programme of Action for France* (1934) focuses mainly on inequitable land ownership, though it does promise cheap machinery and fertiliser for poor farmers (this was recycled into the 1938 *Transitional Programme* for the Founding Conference of the Fourth International). Nothing is said about sustainable agriculture.

Perhaps more alarmingly, Trotsky enthused over the possibilities of genetic engineering to an extent that put him firmly in the camp of eugenics. In *The Russian Revolution*, he predicts that “Man will set to work on himself, in the pestle and mortar of the chemist. For the first time, mankind will regard itself as raw material, or at best as a physical and psychic semi-finished product”. In *If America Should Go Communist*, he goes further: (people) “will apply genuine scientific methods to the problem of eugenics.”

If one puts together Trotsky’s general thoughts

on farming practices with what appears to be an enthusiasm for genetic manipulation, it might be fair to conclude that he would have become a supporter of the development of genetically modified crops and transgenic animals. The fact that, in 2005, 70% of products on U.S. grocery shelves include GM ingredients presumably would not have bothered him.

#### Trotsky on lifestyles

Like most Marxists, Trotsky had little to say about consumption patterns and lifestyle choices. He did denounce drunkenness and swearing but otherwise he kept off the subject of how individuals should lead their lives, despite the cumulative impact of those decisions on individual mental and physical health, on social services such as health care and, most significantly, the resultant demands placed on environmental systems. Thus he has little to say about matters such as personal diet, exercise, sexuality, consumer goods spending or leisure options, though at one point he does mock “vegetarian-Quaker prattle” (*Terrorism and Communism*, 1920).

Yet, in his time, such issues were being widely discussed. In industrial countries like Britain, for example, vegetarian publications had circulated since the middle of the 19th century. In its final two decades bodies like *The Fellowship of the New Life* raised other lifestyle issues. In the 1930s George Orwell felt driven to denounce folk such as fruit-juice drinkers, nudists, sandal-wearers, and “Nature Cure” supporters.

For the purposes of this discussion only the ecological aspects of such matters will be discussed. For example, though there are strong health and animal welfare grounds for a vegetarian diet, it is the inefficient and degrading use of land and resources that, ecologically speaking, condemns high meat consumption. Trotsky did once comment (in *If America Should Go Communist*) on how a Communist government must “deliver the concrete goods which the average man desires”. He went on to define these thus: “his food, cigars, amusements, his freedom to choose his neckties, his own house and his own automobile.” The health effects of cigars can be left to one side but it must be noted that tobacco cultivation is a peculiarly ruinous land use whose long-term consequences on soil quality and on neighbouring forests (via tobacco curing) may well overshadow its short-term impact on human health. Henry Ford, for one, would certainly have agreed with Trotsky’s enthusiasm for motor car ownership. Its ecological consequences have been disastrous, both in terms of oil depletion, pollution and land sterilisation (highways, car parks etc) and in more indirect ways through the encouragement of suburban sprawl (which, of course, necessitates more car usage).

Trotsky had few worries about the lifestyle

choices and tastes of the ordinary citizen. He had not “the slightest fear that this taste will be bad” and, as also quoted above, he looked forward to the day when “man will learn to ... build peoples’ palaces on the peaks of Mont Blanc and at the bottom of the Atlantic”. Of course it is foolish to generalise about mass culture and the factors that shape it. Yet there may be grounds for some reservations.

At many entrances to American National Parks, for example, squat hideous “gateway” towns into which tourists enthusiastically throng. They also pile into places like Las Vegas, which blends gross vulgarity with extreme unsustainability. Many people positively prefer the identikit concrete hotel blocks that sprawl across alpine meadows and along Mediterranean and other beaches to environmentally friendlier alternatives. Millions of people think it fun and fulfilling to shop until they drop. To some extent at least, leisure and entertainment industries prosper because they give their customers what they want. Trotsky is, at the very least, cavalier to wish away potential problems.

What was to be done?

This discussion has concentrated on Trotsky’s ideas and policies insofar as they relate to the ecological dimension and related issues. Nothing has been said about the general crisis that faced the Bolsheviks after 1917. They had seized power, with considerable popular support in the big cities and amongst certain sections of the army and navy. They quickly became isolated, losing popularity within Russia and facing a White counter-revolution supported by foreign intervention. The revolutionary wave in Europe subsided, intensifying Soviet isolation. The country they ruled was in a state of chaos and desperate poverty rife.

It is far from clear whether there was any way out of this situation. Non-Bolshevik critics like Martov had long predicted that it would all end in tears, with a return to crude economic exploitation and repressive political despotism. Stalin’s policies certainly laid waste to huge sections of the Soviet environment and brought hell to millions. But both Trotsky and Bukharin’s alternatives had major drawbacks too, which Party rivals were quick to spotlight. Trotsky, for example, was characterised by Krasin at the 1923 Party Congress as a would-be plunderer in the manner of British industrialists and imperialists decades before. Bolsheviks of all hues were firmly lodged between a rock and a hard place.

Yet that was only the case because none of the competing factions was prepared to consider other means and other destinations beyond that of across-the-board industrialisation and material abundance. Another road might have been one based on a decentralised, village-based system built around co-operatives, with modest development of carefully selected industrial technologies and an

equitable distribution of resources. This might have offered both an ecologically sustainable and socially tolerable system. However, the urban-industrial paradigm shared by not just the Bolsheviks but also the Mensheviks and others precluded its adoption as a possible way forward.

But that is past history. What counts now are lessons that can be drawn from the experience for the future. Most serious socialists today are probably “Trotskyist” in the very loosest sense of the word. It would seem that Trotsky’s (and, to a lesser extent, Marx’s) legacy is partly the reason why that movement has failed to address the ecological crisis. Even at the most basic level, most serious journals and newspapers in the movement have treated the biggest challenge facing humanity as something quite marginal or, at best, one issue amongst many and one readily put down the agenda.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1970s the Left, with few exceptions, simply sneered at the warnings issued by the Club of Rome and the Blueprint for Survival team, dismissing them as reactionary elitists seeking to keep the workers from their just deserts. In actuality the “ecodoomsters” were spotlighting issues that demanded a across the board rethink of analysis, goals, and policy. Failure to do so can only lead to that dustbin of history into which Trotsky once metaphorically cast the Mensheviks.

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Evidence of "overshoot" is continually changing. Websites tend to be more up-to-date than traditional publishing. See, for example:

- The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a project launched by the World Bank @ <http://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.aspx>
- The Global Environmental Outlook from the United Nations Environment Programme @ <http://www.unep.org/Geo/index.htm>
- The Living Planet reports from the World Wide Fund for Nature @ [http://www.panda.org/news\\_facts/publications/general/livingplanet/index.cfm](http://www.panda.org/news_facts/publications/general/livingplanet/index.cfm)
- The Vital Signs and State of the World series of reports from the WorldWatch Institute @ <http://www.worldwatch.org/pubs/vs/> and <http://www.worldwatch.org/pubs/sow/>
- Reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change @ <http://www.ipcc.ch/about/about.htm>
- Reports from Global Biodiversity Outlook @ <http://www.biodiv.org/gbo/>

## Notes

1. There is now a vast literature on Trotsky's life and time. Most studies suffer from the same blind-spots criticised in this essay. The most famous biography, the trilogy by Isaac Deutscher, is very well written but flawed by the concessions it makes to Stalinism. For a study of Trotsky from a perspective that has viewed Stalinist Russia as a form of state capitalism, try *Trotsky's Marxism and Other Essays*

by Duncan Hallas (Abstract Sounds, 2005). It shares the fundamental cornucopianism of more conventional Trotskyism, e.g. Ernest Mandel's *Trotsky as Alternative* (Verso, 1995). A range of views can be sampled in *The Ideas of Leon Trotsky* edited by Hillel Ticktin and Michael Cox (Porcupine Press, 1995). A very sympathetic but not too hagiographical biography which refutes many calumnities about its subject is *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky* by Victor Serge and Natalia Sedova Trotsky (Wildwood, 1975) while a short, readable and fair introduction is available in *Trotsky* by Irving Howe (Fontana, 1978).

See also <http://www.trotskyana.net> and <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/index.htm>

2. Good histories of ecological thought include Marshall (1992) and, with more specific focus on "limits-to-growth" theory, Kassiola (1990). For histories of the environmental movement, see Shabecoff (2003) and Spowers (2002). Human destruction of the environment down the centuries is charted in Broswimmer (2002), Diamond (1998 and 2006), McNeil (2000) and Ponting (1991).

3. Curry (2006) is a succinct and readable guide to Ecocentrism. There are some useful anthologies, notably Butler (2002), Drengson and Inoue (1995) and Sessions (1995). Marshall (1992) gives a more historical perspective. The writings of the Canadian scientist Stan Rowe remain an outstanding example of how ecology as a science (and one treated holistically not in the reductionist manner now dominant) can be blended with ecologically informed ethics. The best on-line collection of ecocentric documents is probably <http://www.ecospherics.net>

4. For an overview, see Wright (2005). Also pertinent are Gray (2004), Gomer (1968), Lasch (1991) and Bury (1932). The best study of the link between the dominant notion of Progress and environmental despoliation remains Leiss (1994).

5. It is difficult to determine the extent that associated measures were a pragmatic response to desperate circumstance. It might be noted that as early as 1916, before he came to power, Lenin was enthusing about American methods. Trotsky's hyper-enthusiasm scarcely suggests a reluctant swallowing of a bitter pill (he had a penchant for bending the stick to the limits, as in his remark that "Compulsory slave labour was in its time a progressive phenomenon"). It might be further noted that there was much articulate opposition, which included the Bolshevik faction of the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions. It is interesting to contrast the ideas of Harry Braverman (*Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*, Monthly Review Press, 1998, first published 1974) and his critique of work under capitalism with the positions of Lenin and Trotsky.

6. See studies by Economy (2004), Smil (1993) and Shapiro (2001). The extremely violent, gangsterish nature of his regime has now been well and truly

established: see, for example, Jang and Halliday (2005).

7. See Chandler (1984) for evidence of the unsustainable impacts of the TVA's works. Worster (1985) documents the disastrous works of the Army Bureau of Engineers.

8. See, for example Goldman (1975), Feshbach and Friendly (1992), Peterson (1993) and Feshbach (1995).

9. See the work of critics such as Weizenbaum (1984), Reinecke (1984), Roszak (1988), Shallis (1984), Shenk (1997), Stoll (1995) and Slouka (1995).

10. Perhaps the best starting points are Daly (1992), Georgescu-Roegen (1971), Glasby (1988) and Trainer (1985). Ophuls (1993) provides an excellent summary in the first half in his book.

11. The actual estimate is that, if 50% of British homes were to watch via a plasma screen TV, two such plants would be needed to meet the extra energy demand, according to researchers at Fujitsu Siemens.

12. In the 2001 *General Election Manifesto of the Socialist Alliance* in the UK, for example, "save the planet" was point 12 out of 15, as if it were not the precondition of all other goals. Such idiocy is simply staggering. It is sad to note that such a sharp thinker as Jim Higgins, who played a leading role in the renaissance of the Marxist Left in the 60s and early 70s in Britain, can only sneer at what he calls "zero-growth Greens ... and Jonathon-Pol-Porritt" ("Trotskyist Bears and Working Class Stars", *What Next?* No.22). Witty though this might be, the remark betrays not just ignorance but also intellectual laziness in someone so keen to chastise others for lack of fresh thinking. Actually the issue is not "zero-growth" but a steady-state, a quite different concept. The writings and

films of popular campaigners like Michael Moore are replete with similar ignorance. The more intelligent theorists like Alex Callinicos seem to realise that due mention of environmental issues is necessary but study of works like his *Against the Third Way* shows that it amounts to little more than a passing nod not a serious engagement. Those trying to forge an ecoMarxism often seem unwilling to make the break with old habits of thought. Thus Enrique Leff in a presentation called "Marxism and the Environmental Question", stresses that "Marxism opposes naturalist, biological, and energy-centred approaches". This is a bit like condemning someone standing at the edge of a skyscraper roof for being preoccupied about gravity. Leff repeats another fallacy, namely that the environmentalist perspective "denaturalizes and desubjectivizes social processes". Au contraire! There is a strong literature in which ecological writers address not just inequality within society but also the cultural and social roots of the environmental crisis. Most significantly, they do not reduce it to simply economic causation as do most anti-capitalists, anarchist or socialist.

To be fair, though, there are some avowedly socialist writers who avoid this nonsense, including Saral Sarkar, an Indian writer resident in Germany, and the American academic Andrew McLaughlin. Another example is the work of David Orton and the Green Web network in Canada. See <http://home.ca.inter.net/~greenweb/> which propagates "Left Biocentrism", a bit of a tongue-twister but which nonetheless manages to blend a necessary anti-capitalism with a realisation that the ecological crisis means that anti-capitalist politics in itself will not suffice. The work of Andre Gorz might seem to fit the bill but on closer examination it lacks deep ecological insight.

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# The Respectable Revolutionaries: Leamington Anti-Racist Anti- Fascist Committee 1977-1981

**Doug Lowe**

**A**LTHOUGH for many people who don't know the area, Leamington may still have an image of a genteel spa town full of elderly rich people in bath chairs, this is far from the truth. It's a place very much divided socially and economically – a division broadly represented by the river running through it. South of the river there are mainly working class areas, a cosmopolitan mix of people who moved to the town after the War to work in the medium-sized and large factories in the area – including Lockheed, Ford, and Flavels. This mixture contained Indians (mainly Sikhs), Irish, Scottish, Welsh and West Indian. Even in the 1970s the towns of Leamington and nearby Warwick were mainly Labour/Liberal voting – it was a commonly held belief that the Tory MP only got in because of the votes from surrounding villages.

In Leamington an anti-racist organisation had existed in the mid-1970s. This had largely been as a response to the activities of a high-profile local fascist, Robert Relf. His well publicised campaign (locally and nationally) to have the right to sell his house to a white family had caused bitter divisions in the town. It had also given the green light for every tinpot racist to spout their nonsense in the pubs, clubs, workplaces and local press, hiding behind free speech and individual liberty. It also tragically contributed to a climate in which racist attacks (and, in one case, murder) occurred.

LARAFAC itself began in November 1977 as an immediate response to the shock number of votes for a British Movement candidate in a district council by-election in Aylesford Ward, Leamington, earlier that month. I joined it when I moved to Leamington in April 1978. I was an active member of the group until it was disbanded in 1981.

For socialists in Britain the period in question is often associated with the rise of a mass anti-fascist movement based around the Anti-Nazi League (ANL).

Throughout the country, though, not all socialists/anti-fascists based their work around the

core anti-Nazi initiatives undertaken by the extensive network of ANL branches and activity. A handful of local groups developed their own approaches, putting much more emphasis on explicitly socialist anti-racist work. LARAFAC was one such organisation.

Although concerned to oppose local fascist activity, it considered the most effective way to accomplish this was by addressing the wider issues around racism.

Underpinning this approach were the broadly socialist beliefs held by all the activists on the Committee, which consisted of members of the Indian Workers Associations, Labour Party, Socialist Challenge, Socialist Workers Party (of which I was a member), supporters of Big Flame and non-aligned anarchists and socialists.

Whilst most members of LARAFAC were revolutionaries, the general principles of “united front” work were upheld. This, though, didn't lead to a “watering down” of its core beliefs. It's often tempting for revolutionaries to believe that this is always necessary because people will be largely impervious to explicitly socialist ideas. The work of LARAFAC proves this is not always the case.

Individuals from various local political organisations (including both Indian Workers Associations) were involved in LARAFAC. They were instrumental in ensuring their own organisations formally and publically supported LARAFAC and its activities. The clear translation of LARAFAC's socialist anti-racism into militant activism never alienated that support from non-revolutionary institutions. Whilst its approach was questioned and challenged from various quarters from time to time, its key role in the struggle against racism was ultimately acknowledged and approved of – to the extent that it was perceived as the anti-racist body in the Leamington area by all relevant local organisations from the Indian and West Indian communities and political organisations. The Community Relations Council became a discredited and

irrelevant Indian Congress and Tory Party rump.

The Newsletter was central to LARAFc's work and was used as a key element in raising anti-racist issues locally. Its circulation was roughly 500-1000 for each issue – all sold in the Leamington and Warwick area. There were the usual outlets for anti-racist activity – the Indian Workers Associations, Labour Party branches, revolutionary socialist groups, trade union branches and the West Indian Association. What gave the Newsletter its relatively large circulation was sales around the working class areas. Combatting racist ideas amongst the white working classes was key to our work and reaching them in every way possible with sound socialist anti-racist ideas was central to LARAFc's approach.

The Newsletter also reflected another vital concern – not to be (and be seen to be) merely reacting to fascist initiatives. Challenging racist ideas of all kinds by explaining their roots and implications for the working classes would provide ammunition for readers to use in their everyday lives, with their families, friends, workmates etc.

Another aspect of LARAFc which, again, the Newsletter reflected, was the "professionalism" of its approach to anything it produced. Sufficient resources were always found to ensure that the Group were not forced to produce material that was on poor quality paper or not very "easy on the eye". Not only was it seen as insulting to the readers, it was felt that sub-standard literature didn't reflect well on the organisation – building up credibility in every way possible was vital.

Also, rather than keep the local media at arm's length (a perhaps natural knee-jerk instinct for many activists) LARAFc actively "courted" them. This paid dividends. The Committee frequently reached a large local audience through quotes given to (but rarely altered by) local newspapers and by publicity for various events and activities (which complemented the highly visible advertising used by LARAFc). Press releases were regular and on certain occasions (appearances by local fascists in court, for example) press/information packs were provided for any journalists present.

I have to emphasise – despite these approaches (which provided ample opportunities to "compromise") – LARAFc's socialist principles and militant anti-racism were never undermined. I believe that the main reasons for this were (1) the support and encouragement its work received from the local black and Asian communities (which saw LARAFc as a genuinely effective anti-racist force) and (2) the forging of increasingly strong links with white working class people who we reached mainly through selling the Newsletter in work-places/at home.

At the General Election of 1979, a right-wing Tory Party under Thatcher undermined the National Front, stealing much of its racist appeal. The success or failure of LARAFc can only really be judged at local level. Like most of his counterparts

elsewhere, the sitting MP in Leamington and Warwick was a right-wing racist. But such a scenario didn't prevent the National Front from putting up candidates in other constituencies harbouring Tories with similar credentials. The National Front and British Movement Regional Organisers lived in Leamington and Warwick, respectively. Yet they were so demoralised by the activities of LARAFc that they couldn't even summon up the effort to make a token gesture of standing a candidate. In fact, the local Indian Workers Associations even tried to persuade the Committee to stand a candidate of its own. Potentially the first possible "socialist unity" candidate in Britain.

Despite the post-election disintegration of fascist activity locally (and, to a large extent, nationally), anti-racist work continued unabated – it had been the core of LARAFc's work anyway. The prevalence of organised racist activity and overt expressions of racist views e.g. graffiti, letters to local papers, declined substantially during the period of LARAFc's existence. Before then, local sympathy and support for Robert Relf had been quite widespread (aided and abetted by the Tory MP speaking out in his support when he went on hunger strike etc.). By 1980, the key fascists were so marginalised they withdrew from any activity. Relf left the area, two died in the early 1980s and one rejoined the Labour Party in Warwick – whether this reflected a change of heart/views is another matter. Their attempts to build a fascist core around them had failed dismally. I think LARAFc can rightly claim much of the credit for this.

The revolutionary groups represented on the Committee attracted only small numbers of new members directly as a result of LARAFc's anti-racist activity. Remember, though, the wider political context – mass unemployment and a trade union movement in retreat and disarray under Thatcher's onslaught.

The organisation was successful in a key objective, though – to isolate the fascists from the widespread "soft" racism in the area. LARAFc also succeeded in mobilising all anti-racist sentiment and activity around it, establishing credibility even amongst clearly non-revolutionary (and even non-socialist) organisations in the Leamington area, despite the overt socialism of its campaigning. The Community Relations Council was a discredited irrelevance. There was no room for softer anti-racist versions that sprang up elsewhere i.e. Liberal/Church/CP-based groups, splitting the anti-racist movement. Potential supporters and participants in such groups had little choice but to back LARAFc (formally and publicly). It became the only show in town. Despite the reservations they almost certainly had about LARAFc's overtly militant socialist anti-racism, to not support it would have utterly marginalised them in the area, particularly as far as the Indian and West Indian communities were concerned.

The Committee disbanded in 1981, mainly because the increasing depredations of Thatcherism meant that socialists had major battles to fight on several other fronts as well – mass unemployment, further attacks on basic trade union rights, the nuclear arms race etc. Anti-racist work was undertaken alongside other socialist activity and not prioritised as it had been to a great extent in the late 1970s. Explicitly anti-fascist work declined substantially following the electoral obliteration of the NF and that organisation's subsequent disintegration in the early 1980s.

It would be a waste if the legacy of groups like LARAFc was restricted to dust-gathering in archive libraries or, at best, the source for narrow academic works. How can activists ensure that their anti-racist work is effective? LARAFc's example suggests that it has to be based on explicitly socialist (i.e. working class based) approaches, explanations and ideas. Watering these down (or dispensing with them completely) to "win over" some mythical "public opinion" or the (paper, usually) support of "respectable" members of a community is tying one hand behind our backs. It will only give the initiative over to those who have no such concerns. ■

## Note

24 Newsletters were produced by LARAFc between September 1978 and the Summer of 1981. These Newsletters were central to the work of the organisation, reflecting the breadth of its work and used as the basis for actively organising against racism.

Copies of all Newsletters (and other LARAFc material) are kept at Warwick University's Modern Records Centre (Record Reference MSS.247).

Contact: Mrs Christine Woodland (Archivist), Modern Records Centre, University Library, Warwick University, Coventry CV4 7AL.

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## UNITE AGAINST FASCISM

Unite Against Fascism is a national campaign with the aim of alerting British society to the rising threat of the extreme right, in particular the British National Party (BNP), gaining an electoral foothold in this country. It aims to unite the broadest possible spectrum of society to counter this threat.

[www.uaf.org.uk](http://www.uaf.org.uk)

## UK Left Network

UK Left Network is an internet forum where communists, socialists, and other left-wingers who either live in the UK or are interested in UK politics can meet and discuss. This forum recognises that no one left group has the monopoly on the truth, and that Marxism will only be developed if we are able to discuss our differences openly, and not behind the backs of our class. Comrades from all traditions, of any organisation or none, are welcome.

[http://groups.yahoo.com/group/UK\\_Left\\_Network](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/UK_Left_Network)

# Is the BNP Nazi? No, it's Worse: It isn't

**Andrew McKibben**

WITH THE increased vote for the British National Party in the last local elections, a chorus of “these Nazis must be stopped” has gone up, along with suggestions concerning what organising tactics might be effective against it. Unfortunately, most such tactics are presently handicapped by a misapprehension about the BNP that leads well-intentioned activists into ineffective tactics. This suspicion is bolstered by the failure of the brave and sincere efforts of Stop the BNP (publisher of *Searchlight* magazine), Unite Against Fascism, the Anti-Nazi League and others to stop the party's growth.

The problem? While it is morally satisfying to call the BNP Nazis, and while their ideology is indeed racist, xenophobic and abhorrent, it's starting to become clear that this rather slippery political beast has in fact shed its old skin, and is no longer plausibly describable as a Nazi, or fascist, party at all. Why is this “worse”? Because, although one must rejoice in the abandonment of this diabolical ideology by anyone, it also increases their chances of success.

The likelihood of real, live, goose-stepping Nazis actually winning much support in Britain is far less than that of some better-packaged and locally-palatable variety of racist extremism. Unfortunately, after 40 years (if you count its National Front predecessor) the BNP seems to have finally figured this out. So the Nazi business has been junked. This is logical: racial hatred is their only political bedrock, and the swastika is just one expendable way of expressing it.

Before I discuss the evidence they really have done this, it's important to remind ourselves that “Nazi” isn't just a word to toss around, even at people who richly deserve any insult they get. Nazism is a real, historical, political ideology, like Marxism, with a specific content and specific criteria for who is one. It is National Socialism, the philosophy of the National Socialist German Workers Party. There's some leeway to include people who don't literally fit, but not every racist demagogue is a Nazi, not even remotely. Some,

especially in foreign countries that fought Hitler in World War II, are even anti-Nazi.

Why care about being so precise? *Because attacking the BNP for being Nazis will backfire, if they're not.* It only invites them to prove to the public that they aren't, and, because this is now probably technically true, they can then just sit back, smile, and say to the public: “See. Our opponents told you we were bad because we were Nazis, and we've now proved we're not Nazis. So we must not be bad. Furthermore, our opponents are liars and you can't believe anything else they say about us.”

This is not good. When the public hears “don't vote for them, they're Nazis”, and then, partly out of sheer titillation at the naughtiness of somebody daring to be such an evil thing, goes and looks at the BNP website and starts reading their propaganda, they will discover fairly quickly a group that has gotten rid of the old swastika trappings, and adopted the image of nice British patriots. If they are taken in, they may then conclude they're a legitimate party, merely being attacked by silly and hysterical left-wing cranks who exaggerate things.

I realise some readers will believe the BNP is still Nazi, and maybe they really have taken it deep enough underground that I'm fooled. But I think not, as some signs are just tell-tales. One of them is the reported expulsion of hardcore Nazis from the party, something loudly complained about on openly-Nazi websites, accompanied with howling accusations of betraying their cause directed at BNP chairman Nick Griffin. Another is the BNP's sudden change in attitude towards Jews, after having vilified them since the earliest days of the National Front. Basically, they now seem to be openly proclaiming they don't consider them evil anymore, and have even publicly mocked Nazi and other anti-Semitic ideas about Jewish world conspiracies and the like.

Take a look at this article by their chairman, for example: “If the neo-cons didn't have the baggage-laden anti-Semites, especially in America, as

bogeymen, they'd have to invent them.... The neocons are mainly Jewish, but they are not 'the Jews'. When it comes to Middle Eastern policy, they are a particular faction, an unofficial overseas agitprop department of Israel's ruling Likud party. To oppose their war is not to oppose 'the Jews', but only one group of Jews and their Christian-Zionist and plutocrat allies...." (Nick Griffin, 'By their fruits (or lack of them) shall you know them', BNP website, 21 March 2006.)

One could read the above words in the *Guardian*! Something is definitely going on. Or look at this article by John Bean, one of the longest-lived right-wing cranks in Britain, and a major BNP ideological guru:

"... there is no factual basis for anti-Semitism, i.e. the belief that Jews are intrinsically our enemy. The worst one can truthfully say of the Jews is that they are intrinsically opportunistic. To survive in other people's countries for 2,000 years, they obviously have to be. But this doesn't make them intrinsically bad; only people who will, like anyone else, pursue their self-interest according to the circumstances of the time. We shouldn't surrender to their pursuit of self-interest. We should, naturally, pursue our own, but in a calm and rational way in the same manner as we deal with other foreign societies, without hatred, mythology, or hostile intent." (John Bean, 'Why we must reject Judeo-obsessivism', BNP website, undated.)

Unless this is *completely* invented out of whole cloth, something fundamental has changed. And I suspect it isn't a complete put-on, as at least one (extreme right-wing) Zionist magazine seems to have picked up on it, and seems to believe it, or most of it:

"... today [the BNP] is, by world standards, a fairly conventional right-wing populist ethno-nationalist party, having abandoned the fascistic trappings, tendency to violence, and weird obsessions that once characterized it. The party's transformation is not wholly complete as of this writing. Some of the rank-and-file membership is clearly not as far along as its leadership. But, after four years of reform, the BNP seems to have managed a decisive break with its past.... The BNP's new ideological complexion is generally denied by its opponents, both on the left and on the establishment 'right' ... but it seems to be real. The accusations of 'sell-out' hurled at the present BNP leadership by devotees of the old ways make this clear, if nothing else does." (Robert Locke, 'The British National Party goes straight', *Think-Israel*, September-October 2005.)

Now a change like this doesn't just happen. I think some kind of deal has been done between the BNP and some extreme-right-wing Zionists. It's a pity that a people who suffered so much from fascism should produce fascists of their own, but we have all seen enough of Israel's behaviour in

recent years to know that some Jews are not exempt from this.

It's obvious that the BNP's foaming-at-the-mouth Islamophobia must have something to do with this unexpected rapprochement. Even they are bright enough to appreciate the logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". They may, in fact, be rather jealous of the treatment Israel routinely hands out to its Muslim population on the West Bank. Or perhaps the anti-Semitic mind just needs someone to hate, and they just find Muslims a juicier target these days.

The BNP still says it's not pro-Israel – they claim to be isolationists, who don't want to side with either side – but one has to wonder, if they're resolutely uninterested in the whole thing, and simply want to ignore Jews entirely, why they've gone to the trouble of making sure everyone knows. The giveaway: they've made clear statements that they're against Britain's funding the Palestinian Authority, which is a *de facto* pro-Israel position if anything is, given that we currently *do* fund it, through the EU.

Maybe they've been paid to do this, maybe it's pure ideology, I don't know. But don't be surprised if this apparent new alliance lasts. Israel and Zionists have been happy to do business with any number of extreme-right parties, from the Afrikaner Nationalists in apartheid South Africa to the Falangists in Lebanon to the Kuomintang in Taiwan. Historically, actual fascists (as opposed to Nazis) can go either way on the Jewish Question: some have been raving anti-Semites, others blasé about Jews, or sympathetic to fascistic elements in Zionism. Extremes do meet.

So should we simply substitute the word "fascist" for "Nazi" in anti-BNP campaigns? Unfortunately, I don't think the BNP is really fascist, either. Fascism means espousing a lot of things, like military glory and massive accumulation of state power, that the BNP sniffs at these days. Whether or not it is sincere, it has become so good at playing this tune that it has even managed to con a significant section of *libertarian* opinion in the UK, like Sean Gabb, into supporting it, at least tacitly. So calling it fascist suffers the same liability as calling it Nazi: it's too easy for them to convince people they're not.

In the end, I think our best bet is simply to classify the contemporary BNP as a right-wing populist racist and xenophobic party, of no stable ideological substance beyond that. Don't try to fit it into a box in which it doesn't really belong, and will wriggle out of if accused. The truth about it is bad enough, without having to dress it up in an ideological costume drama from 1936.

"Racist" is good enough for me, adding "xenophobe" when one needs to elaborate. And, of course, there's always "thuggish" and "criminal". This sheep smells bad enough without having to tell people it's really a wolf. ■

# Suited and Jackbooted: Behind the Hype, the BNP are Still a Fascist Party

**Ben Drake**

**F**IRST OFF, thanks to Andrew McKibben for a clearly sincere contribution to the debate on combating the BNP, and for expressing doubts which I know are shared by quite a few genuine anti-racists and anti-fascists.

And well done too for reiterating the violent and thuggish nature of the party. It never gets reported enough that Nick Griffin's right-hand man Tony Lecomber has convictions for assaulting a Jewish schoolteacher and for – I kid you not – bomb-making. (Check the public record!) On this anniversary of 7/7 you'd think that'd be mentioned occasionally when the media decide to do one of their sporadic BNP publicity-fests.

But also, for all their shiny-suited entry into the wonderful world of spin-doctoring, the leadership and core membership of the BNP remain hardcore Fascists in the full sense.

I wholeheartedly agree terms like Fascist and Nazi shouldn't be thrown about with abandon. They need to be used carefully and specifically, to describe only those movements driven by the principles and forces that drove Mussolini's and Hitler's parties – and with the potential of leading us into the same hell-on-earth if ever allowed into power. For that reason I have no truck with abusing groups like UKIP or Kilroy's erstwhile mob as Fascist – right-wing populists for sure but that's many leagues short of Fascism. Nor on the other hand is it accurate to lump in Al-Qaeda or their ilk with Fascism, though I acknowledge some (*Searchlight*, notably) might dispute this.

But the BNP are Fascist. First, because the dark heart of their politics remains "Race and Nation" with the latter absolutely defined in terms of the former. They continue to operate as part of an international network of White Supremacist groups, and their stated mission is still to "save" the (ill-defined) "white race" from multiculturalism. Of course they make strenuous efforts to disguise this – they've finally twigged how absurd and paranoid it seems to sane people. But scratch the sur-

face and it's still there, in many cases semi-publicly in their publications and on their websites and bulletin boards.

It's true that Muslims have replaced Jews as their preferred number one hate group for the new century. But that's not fundamental. Fascists are shamelessly opportunistic – they absolutely need scapegoats but it doesn't matter really who they are, as long as they can be defined as "Other" (non-White) and a threat. Hence Jews in the 1930s, Muslims now.

(Once in power the Nazis killed Jew and Muslim alike – as well as other non-Whites, Slavs, Travellers, gay people, socialists, trade unionists, feminists, disabled people. It's never been a good idea to ignore the lessons of history – in this case, that Fascism is everyone's enemy.)

And second the BNP are Fascist in their methods and strategy. What sets Fascism apart from "bourgeois" right-wing ideologies – and what makes it such a menace – is their unvarying strategy to use violence (initially street-level and then state violence wherever they get power) to physically smash all opposition, especially workers' organisations. This is a step beyond normal politics of any stripe.

The Merseyside Trades Council activist and anti-fascist who recently had his face slashed is only their latest target. Anti-racists and anti-fascists can report a catalogue of such attacks and abuse. As reported in Parliament recently, BNP supporters even maintain a website recording names, addresses and photos of "Reds", with fairly self-evident intent.

And the final culmination and destination of such political violence was played out in what remains the greatest horror of the 20th century – the Holocaust, where some fifteen million, including at least six million Jews, died in the Nazi death camps.

If the BNP have really put such an aim behind them, then ask yourself why they continue so in-

sistently to deny and downplay the Holocaust. They're fools but (alas) not idiots – they know they'll get nowhere if they admit their ideological link to the Nazi regime. But their Holocaust denial gives the game away.

Behind the shiny suits lurks the same hatred,

the same rotten ideology. We must expose them for who they are, and stand together to stop them. Never forget, never again.

**This article first appeared on the SUN website ([www.socialistunitynetwork.co.uk](http://www.socialistunitynetwork.co.uk))**

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# Why the BNP is Still Fascist

**Geoffrey Brown**

**T**HE GAINS made by the BNP in local elections in recent years – it now has almost fifty councillors, an achievement unprecedented in the history of the far right in Britain – have been assisted by a systematic revamping of the party's image. The public expressions of Nazi sympathies and Holocaust denial for which the BNP had become notorious have been junked and it now presents itself as a respectable, mainstream political party. The question arises – does this amount to a fundamental change in the BNP's political character, or is it a cosmetic exercise designed to fool voters into backing an organisation that has in reality failed to break with its fascist past?

## Origins of the BNP

That the British National Party has fascist origins is of course indisputable. The party was founded in 1982 under the leadership of John Tyndall, a longtime Nazi sympathiser whose involvement with the far right dated back to the 1950s. A former chairman of the National Front and editor of the fascist magazine *Spearhead*, Tyndall was on record as stating that "*Mein Kampf* is my bible".

Having resigned from the NF in 1980 after losing a factional struggle against his rival and former close collaborator Martin Webster, Tyndall formed his own group called the New National Front. He established the BNP on the basis of a fusion between the NNF and two smaller fascist groups, the British Movement and the British Democratic Party. Tyndall remained at the head of the BNP until 1999, when he was successfully challenged for the position of chairman by the present incumbent, Nick Griffin. After his death in July 2005 a *Guardian* obituary rightly described Tyndall as "a racist, violent neo-Nazi to the end".

## Enter Nick Griffin

For all the carefully cultivated "reasonableness" of his public persona today, Griffin has a similar far-right background to Tyndall. He was a national organiser for the NF in the 1970s, and in the 1980s was heavily influenced by Roberto Fiore, a leader of the Italian fascist organisation the Armed Revolutionary Nuclei (NAR), who fled to Britain to avoid prosecution over the 1980 bombing of Bologna railway station in which 85 people died. Throughout the 1980s Griffin was a leading figure in what remained of the NF, promoting a NAR-inspired "Third Positionist" ideology that claimed to offer an alternative to both capitalism and communism. Griffin and the Third Positionists advocated a "political soldier" strategy which rejected the 1970s NF's objectives of mass membership and electoral success in favour of building an elite corps of professional fascist "revolutionaries".

However, as the NF fragmented in an outbreak of political infighting, the Third Positionists broke away in 1989 to form a separate grouping, and by 1991 Griffin had abandoned organised fascist politics altogether. After a brief period in the political wilderness he joined the BNP in 1995 and became editor of Tyndall's magazine *Spearhead*. Ironically, in view of subsequent developments, Tyndall brought Griffin into the BNP to act as a counterweight to an opposition headed by Tony Lecomber and others who favoured playing down the fascist character of the party in order to establish a wider popular appeal.

Griffin used *Spearhead* to denounce the "spiral of sickly moderation" and scorned the idea of the BNP projecting an image of restraint and respectability. Commenting on the party's earlier success in a council by-election in Millwall in 1993, Griffin

wrote that the voters had not backed “a Post-Modernist Rightist Party, but what they perceived to be a strong, disciplined organisation with the ability to back up its slogan ‘Defend Rights for Whites’ with well-directed boots and fists. When the crunch comes, power is the product of force and will, not of rational debate.”

In the course 1998, however, Griffin executed a dramatic U-turn and placed himself at the head of the Lecomber faction, arguing that the Tyndall-led BNP’s overt identification with fascism was a political liability. (As he and Lecomber later informed Tyndall: “The many photographs of you in neo-Nazi uniform have always been a public relations handicap for the party.”) When Griffin stood against Tyndall for the party leadership in 1999 he did so on a programme of “modernising” the organisation in order to make it more electable.

Griffin was inspired by the example of Jean-Marie le Pen’s Front National, which has won significant electoral support in France by distancing itself from its fascist origins and taking on the character of a more mainstream right-wing party. (Griffin modelled the BNP’s “Red, White and Blue” festival on the FN’s “Fête Bleu, Blanc, Rouge” and the BNP’s magazine *Identity* borrowed its title from the FN’s *Identité*.) Having ousted Tyndall, Griffin set out to persuade the BNP membership to abandon their skinhead haircuts and swastika badges, wear smart clothes and in general project a more acceptable image, a tactic encapsulated in the slogan “suits not boots”.

Griffin has a history of making sharp ideological turns in which he has embraced political views that he earlier repudiated and has condemned positions that he once enthusiastically supported. As some of his former comrades observed after he took over the leadership of the BNP: “He has been a conservative, a revolutionary nationalist, a radical National Socialist, a Third Positionist, a friend of the ‘boot boys’ and the skinhead scene, a man committed to respectable politics and electioneering, a ‘moderniser’. Which is he in reality?”

Griffin himself would claim that over the years he has undergone a genuine ideological evolution in which he learned from his mistakes and adapted his views to a changing political reality. A more convincing explanation is that he is an unprincipled opportunist who is prepared to adopt or reject any variant of far-right ideology in order to further his own personal ambitions.

Griffin explains ‘modernisation’

At the same time as he proposed to moderate the BNP’s image, Griffin made it clear that the party’s fundamental politics had not changed, and that its core membership should remain committed to fascism. In a 1999 article for Lecomber’s magazine *Patriot*, published some months before he deposed Tyndall as chairman, Griffin outlined to BNP

activists his plans for the “modernisation” of the party. He wrote:

“Why do nationalists [i.e. fascists], and nationalists alone, insist on spelling out in words of one syllable where they come from and where they want to go? Is it really honesty, or is it just plain stupidity? This is a life and death struggle for white survival, not a fancy dress party. A little less banner waving and a little more guile wouldn’t go amiss....

“As long as our own cadres understand the full implications of our struggle, then there is no need for us to do anything to give the public cause for concern ... we must at all times present them with an image of moderate reasonableness....

“Of course, we must teach the truth to the hardcore, for, like you, I do not intend this movement to lose its way. But when it comes to influencing the public, forget about racial differences, genetics, Zionism, historical revisionism [i.e. Holocaust denial] and so on – all ordinary people want to know is what we can do for them that the other parties can’t or won’t.”

Griffin emphasised that this did not mean the BNP had abandoned its long-term political objectives. He argued that it was all a matter of tactics and expediency:

“Politics is always the art of the possible, so we must judge every policy by one simple criterion: Is it realistically possible that a decisive proportion of the British people will support it? If not, then to scale down our *short-term* ambitions to a point at which the answer becomes ‘yes’ is not a sell-out, *but the only possible step closer to our eventual goal.*”

Fascist sympathies

Out of the public eye, the BNP’s “cadres” make no secret of their fascist sympathies. In a 2002 Channel 4 documentary entitled *Young, Nazi, and Proud* Mark Collett, the then head of the BNP’s youth organisation and a protégé of Griffin, was secretly filmed declaring that “Hitler will live on forever”. Collett endorsed Griffin’s view that an openly Nazi movement was inappropriate to Britain in the early 21st century. But he insisted:

“National Socialism was the best solution for German people in the 1930s.... When people say ‘Do you take any inspiration from that?’, I mean, I honestly can’t understand how a man who’s seen the inner city hell of Britain today can’t look back on that era with a certain nostalgia and think, yeah, those people marching through the streets and all those happy people out in the streets, you know, saluting and everything, was a bad thing ... would you prefer your kid growing up in Oldham and Burnley or 1930s Germany?”

In October 2004, when the BNP contested a council by-election in Dagenham, an *Evening Standard* reporter infiltrated their campaign. He quoted Tony Lecomber, who as we have noted was

one of the earliest proponents of the current “modernising” project, expressing similar pro-Nazi sentiments to Collett’s. Lecomber asked: “Do you remember *Cabaret* with Liza Minnelli, the part where, one by one, the Hitler Youth, our fellas, stand up and start saluting and singing? That is right stirring that is, gets the blood up every time.”

On the eve of the 2005 general election the *Yorkshire Evening Post* reported details of a video made at a BNP social event “in which its members and supporters sing neo-Nazi songs, praise the leadership of Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich, and give Sieg Heil salutes accompanied by shouts of ‘Auschwitz!’.” One of the songs sung in the video is “a re-write of the Kenny Rogers 1969 chart hit ‘Ruby, don’t take your love to town’, except that the words have been changed to ‘Nigger, get the \*\*\*\* out of my town’.”

A recent study published by the University of Essex, *The BNP: The Roots of its Appeal*, has commented that such reports “reveal a British National Party that is far from throwing off the violence, racism and fascist sympathies that Griffin seeks to disown”.

#### BNP and anti-semitism

As a convinced Nazi, Griffin was until his latest political turn an unabashed anti-semitite. In 1997 he co-authored a pamphlet entitled *Who are the Mindbenders?* which asserted that the British people had been brainwashed by Jewish-controlled media. It was a typical paranoid fascist fantasy about a world dominated by cabals of scheming Jews.

In May 1998 Griffin was found guilty of inciting racial hatred and received a two-year suspended jail sentence. The charge arose from his writings in the BNP publication, *The Rune*, in which he referred to the Holocaust as the “Holo-hoax”. Attacking far-right “historian” David Irving for admitting in an interview that up to four million Jews were killed by the Nazis, Griffin wrote: “True revisionists will not be fooled by this new twist to the sorry tale of the Hoax of the Twentieth Century.” The prosecution was the result a complaint to the police by the Liberal Democrat MP Alex Carlile, who was attacked by Griffin as “this bloody Jew ... whose only claim is that his grandparents died in the Holocaust”.

In his defence Griffin reasserted his stand on Holocaust denial in unequivocal terms: “I am well aware that the orthodox opinion is that 6 million Jews were gassed and cremated or turned into lampshades. Orthodox opinion also once held that the earth is flat.... I have reached the conclusion that the ‘extermination’ tale is a mixture of Allied wartime propaganda, extremely profitable lie, and latter [day] witch-hysteria.”

However, one of the notable features of the BNP’s makeover under Griffin’s leadership has been his efforts to avoid public displays of anti-semitism. Bizarrely, the party even has a councillor

of Jewish origin – Patricia Richardson (*née* Feldman) who won a seat in Epping Forest in 2004. Richardson justifies her membership of the BNP on the grounds that the “present party is different to the old party”, which is of course precisely the message that Griffin wants to convey to the electorate, though the issue has provoked angry criticism from within the BNP’s ranks.

Last year Griffin told an interviewer that the BNP now rejects “old fantasies about Learned Elders of Zion controlling the world, and the rabid anti-semitism that they reflect and incite”. He explained:

“Look – we have very serious enemies in this country, both at home and abroad. If you’re going to go with that old nonsense of Jews under every bed and responsible for all the ills of the world, then you’re going to have a crazy strategic vision of who you’re fighting and what to do about it. The idea that ‘the Jew is the enemy’ is simply over for us now, and not a moment too soon, because now we can get on with the real struggles.”

Who are these “real struggles” to be fought against, then? Griffin told the same interviewer:

“We are deeply concerned about the mainly – though not exclusively – French elite project to morph the EU, Turkey and the Maghreb into ‘Eurabia’. Bat Ye’or is 100% right about this. If this now far-advanced scheme comes to fruition then it would in turn lead to the Islamification of the whole European continent. A generation ago the revival of the historic Islamic threat to Europe would have been unthinkable; now it is clearly destined to be the great issue and decision of our time. For us, the closely linked threats of mass Third World immigration and Islamification outweigh all other considerations.”

More recently, Griffin has repeated this point in an article on the BNP website, condemning “people whose one-track concern about ‘the Jews’ is blinding them to the clear and present danger of resurgent Islam”. As usual, Griffin argued this on purely pragmatic grounds. He stressed: “We should be positioning ourselves to take advantage for our own political ends of the growing wave of public hostility to Islam currently being whipped up by the mass media.” In short, joining in the incitement of Islamophobia would produce better results than promoting anti-semitism.

Thus the May 2006 local election campaign was fought by the BNP as a “referendum on Islam”. Their election leaflet stated:

“Terrorist atrocities in London, militant marches on our streets and ‘preachers’ calling for the deaths of normal British people simply because they don’t follow Islam. This is not some nightmare vision – but the reality of Islamic extremism in Britain today, yet our government do nothing but pander to these people. The BNP say enough is enough! We are the only people speaking out against the dangers of the Islamification of Britain.

If you want to make Blair and Co hear your voice, vote BNP, and use this election as a referendum on Islam.”

However, this shift in political tactics does not mean the BNP membership have abandoned their anti-semitic views. In the documentary *Young, Nazi, and Proud* Mark Collett, unaware that he was being recorded, opined: “I’d never say this on camera, the Jews have been thrown out of every country, including England. There’s not a single European country the Jews have not been thrown out of.... When it happens that many times it’s not just persecution. There’s no smoke without fire.”

In 2003 Steve Batkin, who has stood as the BNP’s candidate for mayor of Stoke, caused Griffin severe embarrassment during the local elections by asserting that Jews had made money out of the Holocaust and had lied about the death toll. Griffin publicly reprimanded Batkin, who was instructed not to confuse “personal hobbyhorses with the party line” or else the BNP’s backing for his candidacy would be withdrawn. A chastened Batkin was forced to inform the press: “I stated my personal view on this occasion and not the view of the Party. It was a mistake.”

The mask slipped again in June 2006 when Liam Birch, the BNP’s candidate in a Plymouth council by-election, was exposed as having posted racist comments on his weblog in which he referred to the “alleged” gassing of Jews by the Nazis and asserted that the chimney of a concentration camp crematorium was “a Soviet dummy”. Birch also wrote: “The Jews declared war on the Nazis, not the other way round.”

It is quite clear that the public downplaying of anti-semitism by the BNP under Griffin’s leadership is just another tactical manoeuvre that does not affect the party’s basic ideology. In any case, a shift in emphasis from anti-Jewish to anti-Muslim racism is hardly evidence of a renunciation of fascism. In October 2005 a contributor to *Combat 18’s Blood and Honour* discussion forum argued, along similar lines to Griffin, though in more forthright terms, that the traditional fascist concentration on Jewish conspiracy theories is now outmoded:

“... the world is facing a bigger threat. Right now our whole way of life is under a threat of the magnitude that no Jew has ever presented us: Sharia Law. Little by little, piece by piece Blair is facilitating the Muslim take over of our society. Burger King remove icecreams because a squiggle on the packaging looks like ‘Allah’. A council removes pictures of pigs during Ramadan. They are pushing and pushing – seeing what they can get away with. If they are refused it’s ‘Islamophobia’. How long before all pork is banned because of ‘Islamophobia’. How long before we are told what to wear, what to drink, what to say?

“At the moment our society is the best in the

world (even if it is run by some secret group of Jews!!). Compare our way of life to the real enemy: People who’ll flog your feet for listening to music or being clean shaven. People who’ll behead you for drinking a lager.... Groups like Hisb ut Tarir [sic] want an Islamic world, with white people as subservients – paying tax to their caliph king. Despite the noise made by Blair, they are still all around us and still getting stronger.

“Obsession with ZOG [Zionist Occupation Government, a popular white supremacist myth] is a distraction. Fuck it – forget about the Jews. Focus on the real enemy. Defending the Jews isn’t something I make a habit of, but at least they are more or less like us.... The Jews don’t eat pork, but they don’t shove their religion down our throats, but there are people out there who will – if we lose sight of who the real enemies are.”

### Conclusion

In summary, I would endorse the assessment of the BNP made by Nigel Copsey, in his book *Contemporary British Fascism: The British National Party and the Quest for Legitimacy* (2004), where he writes that “even if the image and tactics have changed under Griffin there has been little modification of the party’s core ideology”.

The fact that the Griffin-led BNP has publicly dispensed with the Nazi trappings of the past does not mean that it has evolved into some sort of post-fascist right-wing populist party, as has arguably been the case with Le Pen’s Front National. This is not to say that such an evolution is theoretically impossible, but the BNP’s organisational and ideological roots in the British Nazi movement are so deep that any such development must be seen as a very long-term prospect.

If we are to argue over definitions, I would concede that the BNP might more accurately be termed “neo-fascist”, in the sense that it draws its inspiration from fascist movements of the past while adapting its ideology and forms of organisation to the political situation in Britain today. But this is no invention of Nick Griffin, even if he has taken the process further than others. Back in 1992, under Tyndall’s leadership, the BNP’s election manifesto stated: “Fascism was Italian; Nazism was German. We are British. We will do things in our own way....”

A discussion of the political strategy necessary to defeat the BNP is outside the scope of this article. But the exposure of the fascist character of the party is an essential part of the struggle against it. The BNP may have attracted wider electoral support over the past few years by prettifying its image, but its main cadre remains a bunch of unreconstructed Hitler admirers and Holocaust deniers. Those who accept Griffin’s fraudulent claim that he has effected a fundamental transformation of the party’s character will only play into the BNP’s hands. ■

# AWL, Imperialism and Lies

**Tony Greenstein**

**B**ACK in the summer of 2005, Bob Pitt suggested that I write an article for *What Next?* on the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and imperialism. As this is a subject that I have some acquaintance with, naturally I agreed. It would have been churlish to refuse. Not surprisingly it has produced howls of outrage as well as an abusive and dishonest article ('Lies, Damned Lies and Tony Greenstein', *What Next?* No.30) from AWL's Sacha Ismail and Daniel Randall.

Now, I guess that one method of dealing with your opponents is to simply call them liars. It is certainly easier than having to refute their arguments. However it is a pity that Messrs Randall and Ismail can't foresake their youthful infatuation with the debating style of the WRP and Stalinism and try and deal with the substance of what I wrote.

I don't criticise AWL for being a tiny organisation of 100 members, after a mere 30 years in existence. After all you have to start somewhere. But it is a bit rich to accuse me of being a sect of one when Ismail/Randall refer later to my membership of the Alliance for Green Socialism, which is three times as large as AWL!

Yes I am based in Brighton and yes, I occasionally post to e-lists. No I don't post for hours every day, as being Secretary of Brighton Unemployed Centre, Assistant Secretary of the Trades Council, Welfare Officer for the largest (UNISON) trade union branch in East Sussex, as well as writing, preparing legal briefs etc, in addition to caring for an autistic child, does not allow me this luxury. I even have time to do things like attend the largest picket for years of a detention centre (Harmondsworth/Colnbrook) last month and the Stop the War March in London. AWL were conspicuous by their absence from both events.

Randall and Ismail complain about the lack of substantiation concerning the Social Democratic Federation. I am surprised that they even question the pro-imperialist politics of the SDF, as this was a major issue of contention within the British Socialist Party that Hyndman formed in 1911 (and he went on to form the National Socialist Party!). If they are that interested they could read, e.g. Hyndman's *The Transvaal War and the Degradation*

*of England* (1899). The only point I was making was that racist and imperialist currents like AWL are not new in the labour movement.

You can of course be an imperialist without being a nation! Likewise there are many individuals one would associate with being representatives of imperialism and imperialists themselves e.g. Balfour, Lloyd George, Curzon etc. Similarly, organisations can be imperialist if the politics of imperialism infuse their body politic. AWL has set up its stall as an organisation supportive of Zionism in the Middle East and hostile to Irish Republicanism. That makes AWL part of the imperialist consensus, but if Randall and Ismail wish to nail their colours to the mast of pro-imperialism rather than imperialism I am inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Likewise Randall/Ismail believe it is a "baseless assertion without substantiation" to say that AWL attacked Sinn Féin from the right. But how else would you characterise their continuous attacks on Irish Republicans for the use of physical force, for supporting a unitary as opposed to a federal Ireland in which Britain would retain a presence via the Loyalists, their characterisation of Republicanism as Catholic, their understanding of Loyalist "fears" or their total failure to give any support to the Irish struggle for independence.

But maybe I should explain something here. I was asked to write an article, of a general nature, concerning AWL's politics of imperialism. If Randall/Ismail disagree with this then I'm sure they will have copious references to hand to refute what I am saying. Even better, being members of such a distinguished British sect, the two comrades would surely do their best to ensure that AWL materials from the inception of Workers' Fight and the Trotskyist Tendency were digitised and put on the internet so that all socialists could have easy reference to them. Unless of course they wish to hide a part of their history? My article was therefore based on my recollections of their political positions as I encountered them over the years. If they disagree with my recollection, then fine - to use their own words, substantiate these disagreements, rather than resort to infantile abuse and the sexual imagery of an overexcited fifth-form student. I have

plenty of things to research, and spending hours poring over the AWL's previous contortions is not a priority. So yes, I clearly remember Sean Matgamna floating the idea of repartitioning Ireland and removing the Catholic counties of Fermanagh and South Tyrone from the Ulster statelet. Do they deny this?

But Randall/Ismail are not beyond practising what they warn others about. Apparently I am guilty of accusing the AWL of seeing anti-Arab discrimination by the Israeli state as "a good thing in itself". The only problem is that I did not say this, although I agree it is certainly the logical outcome of their politics. What I said was that AWL "don't support a Two States position because it is the only thing that is attainable. They see the existence of the Israeli State, a State of its Jewish citizens, for whom its Arab citizens are at best a tolerated minority, as a good thing in its own right". In case Randall/Ismail are still bemused, it is the existence of the racist State of Israel that they see as a good thing in its own right (not "in itself") rather than its Apartheid policies, although I agree that the one follows on logically from the other!

It is likewise a matter of record that the AWL have become one of the main supporters, alongside people like Nick Cohen, of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, whose Iraqi Communist Party leadership participated in the first US puppet administrations. What is their beef about this? Is it not true?

Ismail/Randall ask which Zionist fundamentalist groups am I talking about. Well, the Union of Jewish Students, an organisation funded by the Israeli State which uses all the tricks of CIA student groups on British campuses, smearing their opponents with the charge of anti-Semitism whenever it has the chance.

Why should the Muslim Association of Britain have been replaced as co-sponsors of the Stop the War Coalition? Opposition to the war is a single issue campaign. MAB represent many British Muslims and regardless of whether they are socialists they have the right, alongside other petit-bourgeois forces, to participate.

Clearly, in orienting at least in part to Respect, which has a left-wing programme of opposition to privatisation, cuts etc, it represents a move leftwards. The nature of the Respect organisation is, of course, another matter, but MAB's roots matter less than where they are going. But I would take Ismail/Randall's protestations just a little more seriously if they had ever raised with their Zionist friends in UJS such matters as land discrimination against Israeli Arabs (93% of Israeli land being reserved solely for Jewish use), the systematic refusal of the Israeli state to finance even the most basic social facilities like sewerage for Israeli Arab villages, its demolition of "unrecognised" Arab villages inside Israel etc, its refusal to allow Israeli Arabs to live in Israel if they marry Palestinians

from the occupied territories. Instead AWL repeat the mantra about the necessity for a Jewish State to exist.

I'm well aware that opposition to imperialist intervention in the Balkans is considered by AWL to be "empty anti-NATO rhetoric". For some of us, though, US imperialism and British complicity is the main issue in international politics. Ismail/Randall protest that they are not anti-Islamic and give us some examples such as the Kosova war which they supported. But I'm surprised that the comrades forget an even better example of their politics. After all, when the USA began supporting the Mujahideen's war against the Soviet regime in Afghanistan, there were no more loyal supporters of the Islamic resistance than the AWL!! Clearly their hostility to Muslims takes second place to support for western imperialism. And if they deny this was their position, then put those issues of *Solidarity/Socialist Organiser* on the web and we can all judge for ourselves!

Randall/Ismail ask, rhetorically, if they were lying when *Solidarity* said "End the occupation" and "No US/UK occupation". Perish the thought that I would accuse the good comrades of lying. No, it was more a question of trying to face both ways at the same time. After all, if AWL do indeed oppose the occupation of Iraq *and want to end that occupation as soon as possible*, then what is preventing them from adopting a clear political position and calling for Troops Out Now?

The best example of the AWL's dishonest political method, was the general meeting of the Socialist Alliance Democracy Platform of 29 January 2005. Daniel Randall, who was there in person, may recall that I moved a motion which stated that: "The SADP calls for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of British, and all other imperialist, troops from Iraq."

Did the AWL support this? No, they moved their own amendment (for which only they voted!) which proposed deleting the above and substituting: "The SADP states its opposition to the occupation of Iraq and its support for Iraqi self-determination. The SADP seeks to build practical solidarity with all working-class forces struggling to end the occupation. Calls for troops out should be consequential to an overall orientation towards working-class solidarity."

So troops out of Iraq should be "consequential to an overall orientation towards working-class solidarity". Maybe Ismail/Randall can tell us whether that "overall orientation" has now been achieved and whether they are now prepared to explicitly join calls for the withdrawal of imperialist troops? It's not much wonder that AWL have played no part in building an anti-war movement in this country.

The reason for this balancing act is, as AWL guru Sean Matgamna explained in a debate with Alan Johnson in December 2004, 'Why we do not

support the USA in Iraq', that the imperialist occupation of Iraq opened up the possibility of a bourgeois democracy:

"Do the US 'intend' to 'create a democratic society in Iraq'? I think they do. But, in the first place, with their methods, it is not unlikely that they will not. In the second place, we must keep in mind that their 'bourgeois democracy' includes not only political liberties and space for a labour movement to develop, but mass privatisation and free-marketteering. In the third place, even if they do finally engineer a 'bourgeois-democratic', US-friendly regime, it may be a large distance from anything we, the Iraqi labour movement, or even the 'best intentions' of the Americans would want.

"They [the USA] are now laboriously trying to reconstruct an Iraqi state. It is impossible to say now what compromises with sectarian forces they will feel obliged to make in this.... Who in their political senses can feel sure that they will not impose constrictions on democracy, including on the rights most essential to the growth of a mass legal labour movement?..."

"If there ever was a case for revolutionary socialists positively to support NATO, the USA, and Britain, it was during the 1999 Kosova war. NATO bombed Serbia to force the Serbian army to leave Kosova, where it had started an attempt at full-scale 'ethnic cleansing' of the entire Albanian population, over 90% of Kosova's people. We did not back NATO, but after an initial bit of fumbling we said nothing to line us up with Milosevic, and we argued against the 'reactionary anti-imperialist' left.... AWL thinks that the setting-up of a bourgeois-democratic system is the best immediate possibility from the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime and the US-British invasion."

Not only does Matgamna confirm that the AWL refused to oppose the NATO invasion of Kosova and the bombing of Serbia, unlike the "reactionary 'anti-imperialist' left", but he also reveals the utter political stupidity of the group that Ismail/Randal belong to. Any fool could tell you that what the US is about in Iraq and Iran has everything to do with oil and nothing to do with democracy. The first act of the US was to shoot some 20 demonstrators dead in Falluja. No doubt the death squads (the El Salvador option), the torture chambers, the open alliance with the Badr brigades etc are all part of the bourgeois democracy that our two AWL "socialists" subscribe to.

As regards the boycott of Israeli universities, Randall/Ismail argue that their position was taken "because we have a general position against all boycotts, believing that positive acts of solidarity are more effective". If that was true then that would be fair enough, but of course that was anything but true. No doubt AWL/SO opposed the boycott of South Africa too, and for much the same reason as Margaret Thatcher, viz. that "boycotts often harm most the people who are your potential allies

(in this case the Israeli left and workers' movement)". Note the lack of any mention of the Palestinian trade unions and workers, the oppressed of the oppressed, who are the very ones who call for boycott because they are in any case starving and who are also excluded from the Israeli "workers' movement".

But I don't recall AWL/SO rushing round the country organising meetings of opponents of the boycott of South Africa, campaigning against it. That is what they did when the AUT voted to boycott Israeli universities. They organised meetings with *Engage*, a group of ex-left academics who were faced with having to actually do something positive in respect of support for the Palestinians for the first time in their lives. At the NATFHE conference I attended one of only two speakers opposed to the boycott was Mark Osborne, who spoke passionately about how people who support a boycott were anti-Semitic before being shouted down by the rest of the meeting.

I respect those socialists who opposed the boycott, not because they are Zionist supporters, but because it doesn't fit in with their overall class orientation. That was the case with the Socialist Party, but the SP didn't strain every muscle in their body to undermine the solidarity actions of others. The AWL *consciously* organised with the supporters of the oppression of the Palestinians, all in the name of "academic freedom". And they organised with some very rum people indeed, including many rightists who believed that the AUT should never take up political positions of international solidarity.

No, I don't think AWL were lying when they called Jane Ashworth and Alan Johnson ex-Marxist Blairites. But there is no contradiction in being sore when people leave you and take your politics to places you'd like to go but can't. AWL can't bring themselves to openly support the occupation of Iraq, and instead confine themselves to debating whether it will bring peace, freedom and bourgeois democracy there. Johnson and Ashworth have no such scruples and of course this means the AWL polemicise with them. It's often the case that there is a much greater intensity of feeling when the dispute is within the family!

I'm not aware that the Alliance for Green Socialism, which certainly does have illusions in the United Nations, supports the introduction of UN troops in Iraq. Maybe our intrepid comrades would like to produce the proof?

Of course AWL supported Roger Godsiff. But did that mean that AWL supporter Jim Denham had to pound the streets campaigning for him? Whatever else one can say about Salma Yaqoob, she at least is not a supporter of Blair's racist immigration and asylum laws. If AWL's politics means that it automatically supports New Labour against any left challenge, and Salma Yaqoob is clearly to his left, then that merely confirms everything else

I've written about the AWL.

Whatever the faults and failings of George Galloway, he at least was a consistent opponent of the war in Iraq. Charles Kennedy and Kenneth Clarke initially opposed the invasion but then supported "our boys" once they got there. Galloway did no such thing.

Randall/Ismail say I haven't gone into "any sort of detail" as to what the collaboration between the UJS and AWL was. Well they've provided some themselves, because as they say they have had UJS at their various events speaking about anti-Semitism. My own recollection is that their leading members caucused, lobbied together and AWL/SO consistently refused to take up the question of UJS bans on anti-Zionists. After all, AWL also called us "anti-Semitic" so they shared a lot in common with UJS. UJS, of course, sought to ban opponents of Zionism but equally it always fought against No Platform for Fascists and Racists because, being racists, they feared it might be used against them!!

And of course there's nothing wrong with changing one's position, but everything wrong if you abandon a position of support for the colonial oppressed peoples for support for one's own ruling class and its military, as they admit over Kosova, which was not about ethnic cleansing and everything to do with bringing Serbia within the free market system. It is equally true today over Iraq where the AWL *refuse* to call for troops out of Iraq.

It is an oft-remarked feature of the political and social inadequate, that they condemn the "sin" in others that they are most guilty of themselves. And so, quite ludicrously, Randall/Ismail cry "liar" at the top of their voices, mangling Mark Twain in the process! What is saddest of all is how transparent their behaviour. Were not the most vicious anti-Semites in the Nazi Party the Brownshirts (SA), that nest of Nazi homosexuals – repressed to a man? And he who was described as "the real engineer" (Reitlinger) of the Final Solution, in charge of the Security Police and later Gauleiter of Czechoslovakia, Reinhardt Heydrich, was in fact a "Mischlinge" a half-Jew himself. Indeed a Mischlinge of the first degree. And it is well known that gay-bashers have often sought to hide their own sexuality by indulging in attacks on others who are also gay.

Quite remarkably therefore for those who scream "liar" at the drop of a hat, Randall/Ismail have produced a whopper. AWL "actively opposed him [Tony Greenstein] when he campaigned to have Jewish Societies banned on campuses".

Now it is true UJS have alleged that I supported banning Jewish societies. The outrageous lie is part of their method of destabilisation. But AWL proclaim that they are a socialist organisation. Whose word do they take? That of a fellow socialist or that of apologists for the Zionist state?

Well it's a no-brainer, because Randall/Ismail not merely chose to believe UJS but in the process

prove my case for me – that AWL and UJS are two peas in a pod. And then AWL complain that I didn't support them in the General Election! In fact, far from supporting the banning of UJS societies UJS has consistently tried to ban Jewish anti-Zionists such as myself or Roland Rance. We are "self-haters" (the old Nazi term) etc.

In a debate with Martin Thomas, the founder and mainstay of the AWL/Socialist Organiser, the latter sent me an e-mail on 26 May 2005 in respect of the AUT boycott of Haifa and Bar-Ilan Universities in Israel. He asked me: "So what do you mean? That you are for a blanket boycott of all Israeli institutions? And all 'Zionists'? (If I remember right, you opposed the banning of student Jewish societies in the 1980s. Were you 'scabbing on the Palestinians' then? I don't think so.)"

In the course of making a polemical point about the Boycott, namely a false equation between Boycott and Banning, Martin Thomas conceded that "if I remember right, you opposed the banning of student Jewish societies in the 1980s". He did remember right, except that I also opposed them in the 1970s!! There isn't a scrap of evidence, nothing, to suggest I have ever supported banning a Zionist/UJS society. Quite the contrary. When such an allegation was made regarding a speech I gave to students at the School of Oriental and African Studies, I wrote in a letter to the *Jewish Chronicle* of 21 November 1986 that:

"I wish to make it clear that I unequivocally support, and always have done, the right of Jewish/Zionist societies to put forward their position on the Palestine/Zionism question. If there is any attempt to ban a Jewish Society at SOAS, I would be perfectly willing to speak against this at a union meeting. Providing, of course, the Union of Jewish Students don't seek to ban me!"

One week later, in another letter to the *JC*, I detailed the attempt of the same UJS to prevent me speaking at Thames Polytechnic. And two weeks earlier, *Beaver* (10 November 1986), paper of the student union of the London School of Economics, led with an article 'UJS Fail to Prevent Speaker on Zionism', namely myself.

On the letters page, the LSE Labour Club Executive issued a statement saying that they had been approached by UJS to support a ban on me. Instead of just agreeing, they investigated the allegations made and found them wanting and therefore produced a leaflet, which I still have, outlining the various allegations. This was not enough for UJS, several members of which approached a Labour Club member who had left my meeting early and "proceeded to insult him publicly, calling him a racist, anti-Semitic fascist. He was deeply distressed and grossly insulted as he has been involved in anti-fascist groups for nearly 10 years". The letter concluded: "We utterly condemn this slanderous public intimidation of members of our club."

This behaviour took place up and down the country. Not only against me but fellow anti-Zionist Jews like Roland Rance. I wrote a number of letters to leading student organisers in Socialist Organiser/AWL to ask them to take this up. They never even replied. Instead we now have Randall/Ismail peddling the same falsehoods as the racists liars of UJS.

If Ismail/Randall want proof of their links and closeness to UJS, their deliberate retailing of the lie that I supported the banning of Zionist/UJS soc-

ieties is that proof. And being stupid liars they probably didn't even realise that this allegation has been copiously documented!

I note that Randall/Ismail finish their tirade with a quotation from Mark Twain in support of their "liar, liar, pants on fire" routine. Clearly they are also acquainted with another of Mark Twain's sayings: "Truth is the most valuable thing we have. Let us economise it." Unfortunately they have been so economic that there was nothing left of it in their article. ■

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## An Enlightened Response to Ian Birchall

**Andrew Coates**

IN 'So What *is* Secularism?' (*What Next?* No.30) Ian Birchall takes me to task for a defence of secularism. He begins by questioning the use of polemical style, races through a picture of the Enlightenment, offers an interpretation of the history of French *laïcité* and the Marxist approach to religion. Birchall compares the stand of those opposed to the veil to those socialists who refused to support Dreyfus, and defends, with some gusto, the political project of his party, the SWP, and Respect. Some of his points are well-taken (those concerning the abstraction of many of my formulae). Other judgements, however, are extremely contentious. Birchall fails to grapple with the nature of political secularism, its philosophical roots, the account of the French secular education system is hopelessly skewed, and his belief that Respect is "secularism in practice", is wholly misguided.

Birchall's portrait of the Enlightenment resembles Aghion's farce *Le Libertin* (on Diderot) more than a serious historical review. Voltaire, it is true, is praised for his involvement in the case of the La Barre (one could add, the Lally affair, the Sirven affair, and, above all, the Calas affair – all victims of ecclesiastical intolerance). But apparently he kept servants and was reluctant to let his acid scepticism spread to them. Bad, bad Voltaire! He and Diderot are singled out for their vacillations towards enlightened despotism. Marx is cited to show that their combat against organised religion ignored

the need to change social conditions (by the way, didn't Marx have some dubious relations with his servant Helene?). All this may well be true. Yet the complex network of ideas emanating from the Lumières contributed to a directly political fight amongst the masses. They're the origin of the concept of human rights, from the early feminist Olympe de Gouges to Tom Paine. In any case, the values of the Enlightenment, which I advocated, were rather broader: the cluster summarised by Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* (1784). That is, the freedom from the command to *obey*: "Have courage to use your *own* understanding!" It is precisely this that is threatened by a renewed acceptance of religious authority and which needs defending.

The picture of the French tradition of *laïcité* is less summary, though no less lop-sided. Birchall presents a functionalist explanation of the growth of mass secular education, endowing students with the cultural capital of republicanism in order to bolster the nation. The relentless clash, for the whole of the 19th century, between the Catholic Church and republicans over the control and content of schooling is left unmentioned. Yet this was a crucial point: the right of the Clergy to oversee all aspects of educational life. The secularists (an approximate translation of *laïc*, which includes the notion of freedom from church control as well as from religion) included Catholic "gallacians" opposed to Rome's power, progressive Christians

(against the Erastian fusion of church and state), deists (in Voltaire's tradition), and free-thinkers, atheists and socialists. (See Georges Weill, *Histoire de l'idée laïque en France au XIX siècle*, Hachette, 2004.) It's not hard to trace a very different picture of the line-up in this battle to Birchall's. Amongst the latter were the most fervent supporters of Dreyfus, such as the most important figure of French socialism, Jean Jaurès. Their nationalist opponents, for example, Maurice Barrès, explicitly attacked secular rationalist education, in *Les Déracinés* (1897) blaming it for France's military weakness. That Jules Ferry, with whom the famous 1905 Separation of Church and State is most associated, supported colonialism as well as secular education can be acknowledged. But that hardly means he backed secularism *because* he favoured imperial expansion.

The push and pull in France over secularism has endured to the present day. From the mass Catholic demonstrations in the early 1980s to protest at plans to bring their state-aided private schools under public supervision, to the contrary mass mobilisation at a project to extend religious education's rights in the early 1990s, this is a live issue. It is within the teachers' unions that support for *laïcité* is staunchest. Some allied groups, such as *La Libre Pensée*, consider the present system already far too complicit with faith institutions. This is surely right, and one needs seriously to consider the institutional framework of a schooling system which excludes so many, fails to tackle inequality ethnic as well as class), and a host of other social issues which socialists would consider priorities.

It is not surprising, therefore, that with this background that a swift response came against an Islamicist inspired campaign to promote the veil in public educational institutions (and, notably, sexual segregation). Apparently Birchall is unaware of the nature of Islamicism: from moderate and conservative wings to the most radical, the different strands are united in their opposition to secularism in any shape and form. All these shades

of politics rest on the weight of a revealed truth: a book whose authority is beyond doubt, and its project, its states, grounded on Islam. One does not have to be an advocate of Michel Onfray's "atheology" to see that there is a serious problem here.

It is one thing to accept the multicultural argument that religious figures will always be present in public life (obviously the case), and that some may be progressive, others not. It is quite another to incorporate the demands of religiously inspired political groups into the foundations of public bodies. Birchall considers that those who wish to prevent schools (the target of the ban on *all* ostentatious religious symbols) from being a battleground for those who wish to impose their "pure" style of dress, is comparable to those French *ouvriers*, like Jules Guesde, who refused to defend Dreyfus. As I have indicated, humanist socialists, like Jaurès, assassinated for his opposition to the Great War, were strong supporters of secularism. It would traduce their memory to imagine them defending any form of theological code, whether in schools or outside. Birchall further considers any "state ban" on the veil anathema, though it is hard to see how any regulation affecting the education system could be anything other than a matter of the state.

Finally, Birchall claims that voting figures demonstrate that Respect is not a communalist or religiously based party. Post-*Big Brother*, it may seem cruel to talk of its leader these days, though as a laughing stock his career is progressing well. Still, George Galloway has repeatedly stated that his organisation is the "party of Muslims", and he himself their representative. True, he has wider allies. Notably the curious figures who signed his petition to free Tariq Aziz. Perhaps it's indicative of his trajectory that one of them was a person I cited myself to demonstrate a convergence between Respect's stand and the culturalist far-right: Alain de Benoist. ■

## Alliance for Green Socialism

The Alliance for Green Socialism is a political organisation devoted to the building of a peaceful, environmentally safe and socially responsible world. A world in which diversity is both respected and celebrated. A world in which relations are based on mutual understanding and not force, where rights and a decent life are available for all, not just the rich. The AGS believes this can come about by the development of a democratic, socialist and environmentally conscious society.

[www.greensocialist.org.uk](http://www.greensocialist.org.uk)

# The Right, the Left and 'Free Expression'

## Martin Sullivan

ON SATURDAY 25 March 2006 a campaign calling itself the "March for Free Expression" (MFE) held a widely publicised demonstration in Trafalgar Square. The protest was primarily motivated by the desire to express solidarity with the right-wing Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* over its provocative decision to publish offensive, and in some cases blatantly racist, anti-Muslim cartoons. Although the organisers stated piously that it would be "a march in favour of free expression, not a march against Muslims", the actions and political records of the participants belied their public denials of anti-Muslim bigotry.

Peter Risdon

The main instigator and organiser of the March for Free Expression was a computer consultant from Cambridge named Peter Risdon, who runs a blog called FreeBornJohn. Another blogger, who might have been expected to sympathise with the aims of the MFE, observed about Risdon: "He describes himself as a 'libertarian', but his blog comes across as hard line English right wing nationalist, with a blanket anti-Muslim stance." Among its list of recommended links, Risdon's blog prominently features such hard-right Islamophobic websites as Jihad Watch, Little Green Footballs, Steyn Online, Gates of Vienna and Western Resistance.

In one post Risdon quoted a notorious attack on Islam by Winston Churchill which begins: "How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries! Besides the fanatical frenzy, which is as dangerous in a man as hydrophobia in a dog, there is this fearful fatalistic apathy. Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live."

Risdon commented that "it is always good to read any prose, however tactless, that derives from a time when people felt able to say what they actually thought about cultures different to their own".

A post by Risdon on the March for Free Ex-

pression website on 19 February encouraged its supporters to demonstrate in Trafalgar Square with reproductions of the Danish cartoons. "Since we are in favour of free speech", Risdon wrote, "and because the reason why newspapers and magazines across Europe (though not, shamefully, in the UK) have republished the infamous cartoons was principally 'We are Spartacus' - we stand together - we will be happy to see reproductions of the cartoons in question at the rally."

Risdon also posted a link to a website selling t-shirts that featured slogans such as "Get your fatwa out of my face. Support Denmark. Support free speech", "Up yours, 'religion of peace'!", "Viking jihad" and "Islam is a blast".

Freedom Association

One of the official sponsors of the "March for Free Expression" was the Freedom Association, whose campaign director Mark Wallace was a platform speaker at the Trafalgar Square rally. This organisation gained notoriety in the 1970s for its energetic defence of the "freedom" of Grunwicks to oppress and exploit its employees without interference from the trade unions. Equally energetically, it has defended the right of racists to promote hostility towards minority ethnic communities.

In 2001 the Freedom Association's chairman, Christopher Gill, spoke out in support of Tory MP John Townend, who claimed that "our homogeneous Anglo-Saxon society" had been diluted by non-white immigration. Gill said: "I don't think there is any doubt that it has been diluted. If you pour enough water on a double scotch it ceases to taste like whisky. As chairman of the Freedom Association, I will defend John Townend's right to say what he wants to say. We must have freedom of speech and people must not be put off saying what they like. I can understand John's concern and I support him. He struck a chord with millions of British people. The whole nation was changed by the passing of mass immigration in the 1970s and 1980s."

In 2003 the Freedom Association's then campaigns director Philip Duly wrote:

“The notion that we can accommodate further unlimited numbers of people to settle in what is already one of the most densely populated countries in the world represents the economics of the madhouse. The pressure for more homes, roads, airports, schools and hospitals will intensify further with few offsetting benefits for the resident population.... At the present time, none of the political parties has resolved to restrict the tide of immigration which is increasing the population by 200,000 every year. The Freedom Association campaign for free speech on population growth and its consequences will therefore continue with the twin aims of stimulating further debate and protecting the rights of the existing population of the United Kingdom.”

In furtherance of its commitment to encouraging “free expression”, the Association’s magazine *Freedom Today* includes a regular “Soapbox” column in which assorted reactionaries are given an opportunity to mouth off. The July-August 2005 issue of the magazine featured a contribution by a former army officer who wrote:

“Four times a year I meet my daughter at Terminal Three of London’s Heathrow Airport. Those who want first hand evidence of the scale of immigration should join me. Not only are most of the workers, including the security guards, of immigrant stock, but I am always outnumbered by about six to one by whole Asian families, preponderantly Moslem, meeting friends and relations. Judging by the amount of luggage they bring with them, they are not here for a two week holiday. No doubt, what I have written will label me as a racist.... I am happy to accept that accusation if I make it clear that I believe in putting the welfare and security of our own citizens ahead of that of economic migrants.”

#### Libertarian Alliance

Another right-wing body sponsoring the March for Free Expression was the Libertarian Alliance, whose director Sean Gabb was a platform speaker at the Trafalgar Square rally. This is an organisation which issued a press release welcoming the acquittal of British National Party führer Nick Griffin and his sidekick Mark Collett on race-hate charges at Leeds Crown Court in February. Gabb was quoted as saying: “Doubtless, there are people who take offence at the expression of certain views on race and immigration. But free speech that does not include the right to give offence is not free speech.” The press release went on to reiterate the Libertarian Alliance’s demand that all legislation against racial hatred and discrimination should be repealed and that “the Commission for Racial Equality and all similar organisations should be abolished, and their records burned”.

In a Libertarian Alliance press release explaining their backing for the MFE, Gabb made clear that they intended to use the campaign to advocate

the right to incite racial hatred. Indeed, he criticised other supporters of *Jyllands-Posten* for failing to defend the right of open racists to express their hatred freely:

“There are those who say they believe in freedom of speech, but then insist that the promotion of ‘hatred’ does not come within the meaning of free speech. The Libertarian Alliance utterly rejects this supposed distinction.... We note with distaste that those journalists throughout Europe who are congratulating each other on how brave and liberal they have been over the anti-Moslem cartoons have not said a word for the freedom of racists and anti-Semites to express themselves.”

In August 2004 Gabb had issued a press release on behalf of the Alliance defending the right to free speech of one Ake Green, an evangelical Christian in Sweden who had been convicted under that country’s anti-hatred legislation after describing homosexuality as “abnormal, a horrible cancerous tumour in the body of society”. Gabb’s press release stated:

“The Libertarian Alliance believes in the right to freedom of speech. This includes, though is not limited to, the right to say anything about public policy or alleged matters of fact. If someone wants to say that homosexuals are the spawn of Satan, or that black people are morally or genetically inferior to whites, or that the holocaust did not happen (but should have), or that the Prophet Mohammed was a demon-possessed, epileptic paedophile, that is his right. If he causes offence, hard luck on those offended.”

#### UK Independence Party

Also among the sponsors of the March for Free Expression were “several branches of UKIP”. Freedom Association chairman Christopher Gill, who so eloquently advocated the defence of “our” Anglo-Saxon society against dilution by non-white migrants, recently defected from the Conservative Party to UKIP – just after Tory leader David Cameron had attacked the latter as “closet racists”. This move was hardly surprising, since UKIP’s propaganda against immigration is virtually indistinguishable from that of the Freedom Association.

“We live on a small island”, UKIP claims. “Our cities are overcrowded, our roads clogged up and our railways are grinding to a halt. Our doctors’ surgeries cannot cope and the hospital waiting lists are growing. New housing estates are covering the countryside. In 2002, the UK government allowed in another 285,000 people. The UK Independence Party will put an end to mass immigration.”

As for anti-Muslim bigotry, in an account of his disillusionment with UKIP (*New Statesman*, 14 June 2004) former member Aidan Rankin wrote: “I listened, with increasing loathing, to a repertoire of anti-Muslim barbs from people who knew

nothing whatsoever about Islam and were proud of their ignorance.... Islamophobia pervades its internal dialogue.”

In 2004 UKIP stood boxing promoter Frank Maloney as its candidate for London mayor. After a visit to Tower Hamlets, a borough with a large Muslim population of Bangladeshi origin, Maloney posted an article on his campaign website condemning Whitechapel as a Muslim ghetto. “Immigrants are not integrating with the rest of British society”, he wrote, “but creating their own areas, where the rule of law does not apply and people have no allegiance to Britain whatsoever – and even seek to harm British people.”

Like the Freedom Association, UKIP clothes its racist rhetoric in appeals for the right to free speech. It repeatedly denounces political correctness, which it claims obstructs an honest and open debate on race and immigration. Thus the UKIP website quotes one member as saying: “I am no racist, but I am prepared to have a discussion about how things like immigration affect our country. I went to a Christian school where they were not scared to talk about the Empire and colonies and other races. You can’t say anything now because people will point their finger and cry ‘harassment’.”

#### National Secular Society

Another organisation with a record of anti-migrant rhetoric that sponsored the MFE was the National Secular Society, whose director Keith Porteous Wood was a speaker at the rally. The NSS graphically illustrates the point made by Owen Jones, in the March 2006 issue of *Labour Left Briefing*, that “as anti-Semitism once clothed itself in the rhetoric of anti-capitalism, today Islamophobia appropriates the language of secularism”.

An editorial on the NSS website responding to the Danish cartoons crisis was headed “Islamist steam roller attempts to flatten European free speech – it must not succeed”. The article outlined a “clash of civilisations” thesis and added that “these cartoons were published in Europe, where European values still have a precarious toehold”. “Precarious toehold”? What was that, other than an appeal to the racist myth that “western civilisation” is under threat from Muslim migration and population growth? The editorial went on to underline the theme of a threatened Islamicisation of the West by polemicising against “those who have attempted to import the values of Islam into our culture, and who constantly try to change the law to enforce those values”.

The editorial concluded: “We therefore support the newspapers around Europe that have reprinted the offending cartoons. We wish there was a newspaper in Britain that had similar guts.... It would give the message loud and clear that our culture, with its hard-won freedoms, is just as valuable to us as Islam is to those in the Middle East and other parts of the world where it holds

sway. We must be as determined and angry as they are. We must stand our corner and love our liberty, just as they love their religion.”

The objective of reprinting the cartoons would be to “stand in unity with those who want to reinforce European enlightenment values”, the editorial stated. Quite how “enlightenment values” are served by publishing racist caricatures that portray Islam as a violent, barbaric and misogynistic religion, thereby feeding into and encouraging the widespread hostility towards Muslims that exists among Europe’s majority white community, was not explained.

However, a patriotic defence of “our culture” against “them” (the Muslim hordes) is par for the course with the National Secular Society. In January 2004 the NSS appealed for donations on the basis that secularism in Britain was “under sustained threat from a resurgent Islam”. In July that year, when the then home secretary David Blunkett announced his plans for a religious hatred law, the NSS website carried an article by its editor Terry Sanderson which read:

“There was rare unanimity among press pundits last week as they made clear their opposition to David Blunkett’s announcement that he intends to introduce a law banning incitement to religious hatred. The fears of the press commentators were clearly and passionately expressed. Will Cummins, in the *Sunday Telegraph* wrote: ‘A society in which one cannot revile a religion and its members is one in which there are limits to the human spirit. The Islamic world was intellectually and economically wrecked by its decision to put religion beyond the reach of invective, which is simply an extreme form of debate. By so doing, it put science and art beyond the reach of experiment, too. Now, at the behest of Muslim foreigners who have forced themselves on us, New Labour wants to import the same catastrophe into our own society’.”

#### Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association

Sanderson is the former press officer of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, which was also among the sponsors of the March for Free Expression. In September 2005 GALHA published an issue of *Gay & Lesbian Humanist* magazine that was filled with anti-Muslim bigotry. One article, by GALHA committee chair George Broadhead, contained the following passage: “There are two terms that, increasingly, annoy us: Islamophobia and moderate Muslims. What we’d like to know is, first, what’s wrong with being fearful of Islam (there’s a lot to fear); and, second, what does a moderate Muslim do, other than excuse the real nutters by adhering to this barmy doctrine?”

There was subsequently a split in GALHA after a majority of its committee took exception to the more extreme racist outpourings in that particular issue of the magazine, which contained statements such as the following:

“the fastest-growing religion is Islam. Chillingly, it continues to grow like a canker, both through immigration and through ... unrestrained and irresponsible breeding” ... “for homosexuals, it is doubtful that there is any such thing as a ‘moderate’ practising Muslim, or that the Koran can be regarded as anything more than just a squalid murder manual” ... “it is not racist to be anti-immigration or anti-Islam” ... “the reckless and mismanaged immigration policies of successive governments have led to the demographics of our major towns and cities being forever changed by huge numbers of foreign settlers” ... “Legal or illegal, many of these Third World and Eastern European newcomers are criminals of the worst kind, and many more are hopelessly ill equipped to live in a complex Western democracy, unable even to speak English in some cases. A parasitic few are bent on the destruction of Western civilisation” ... “Redundant churches are sprouting onion domes and minarets. We are becoming strangers in our own land” ... “In the Netherlands, the warnings of popular gay politician Pim Fortuyn were tragically snuffed out by a left-wing assassin before he could sufficiently alert people to the damage the influx of Muslims is doing to his own native land”.

However, George Broadhead, who found the concepts “Islamophobia” and “moderate Muslim” so annoying, remains chair of the GALHA committee. The more overt racists may have left, but GALHA plainly has not rid itself of anti-Muslim bigotry.

Evan Harris

The only speaker at the Trafalgar Square demonstration from one of the major political parties was Liberal Democrat MP Evan Harris, who is an honorary associate of the National Secular Society and a vice-president of GALHA. During the controversy within GALHA over the anti-Muslim articles in *Gay & Lesbian Humanist* magazine, it was noteworthy that Harris failed to make a single public statement dissociating himself from the publication of this explicitly racist material.

Harris has been the most vociferous British supporter of the French ban on wearing the hijab in state schools. He defended this disgraceful attack on the religious rights of young Muslim women as being “in keeping with centuries of secularism as far as state institutions are concerned in France”. When a radio interviewer asked him “is this ban not against the fundamental human right of freedom of religious practice?”, he replied, “no it isn’t because ... schools are for learning not for practising religion”.

Describing Harris’s remarks on the French hijab ban as “abhorrently prejudiced”, the Islamic Human Rights Commission pointed out that the ban had “resulted in an upsurge of anti-Muslim discrimination. Currently Muslim women will be

refused a civil marriage ceremony in Paris unless they remove their scarves, hospitals and clinics are refusing to treat Muslim women unless they do likewise. Other women have been denied access to shops and banks. Is this what the Liberal Democrats wish to see in the UK? Certainly based on his remarks, Dr Harris sees little wrong with this scenario.”

By contrast, Harris’s stand against Muslims’ rights won him plaudits from the fascists. In September 2004, in a post on the National Front’s email discussion list, one far right admirer wrote:

“Evan Harris is not a perfect MP but nevertheless he has spoken out on a number of important issues where others have remained silent. For instance he has campaigned against special religious education for minorities. He has opposed the hijab and was one of the few to criticise it in public. Harris is a defender of freedom of expression.... The government is attempting to legislate against ‘religious hatred’. All patriots must oppose this proposed law which could be used against us. You will find that Harris will be one of the most articulate spokesmen against this law.”

This indeed proved to be the case. The government’s attempt to close a loophole in the law against inciting racial hatred, which has allowed the British National Party to stir up hatred against Muslims on the basis that they are not a mono-ethnic faith group, was vigorously opposed by Harris, who argued that it was “essential that we maintain free speech in discussing and criticising religious ideas, doctrines and practices”. He worked hard to sabotage the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill by means of an amendment drawn up by his fellow Liberal Democrat, Lord Lester, which had the effect of completely neutralising the legislation. As a result of Harris’s efforts, fascists can now continue to promote racial hatred under cover of attacks on Islam. No wonder some of them regard him as a bit of a hero.

Peter Tatchell

Perhaps the best-known speaker at the March for Free Expression was Peter Tatchell, of the gay rights organisation OutRage! Though Tatchell’s Islamophobia has become particularly obsessive in recent years, he has been promoting such views for a decade or more. In 1995 he published an article in *Gay Times* entitled ‘Islamic fundamentalism in Britain’ which characteristically depicted Muslim communities not as potential allies in the struggle against discrimination but as an alien force threatening the liberal values of (white, non-Muslim) British society.

“Although not all Muslims are anti-gay, significant numbers are violently homophobic ...”, Tatchell wrote. “The political consequences for the gay community could be serious. As the fundamentalists gain followers, homophobic Muslim

voters may be able to influence the outcome of elections in 20 or more marginal constituencies. Their voting strength could potentially be used to block pro-gay candidates or to pressure electorally vulnerable MPs to vote against gay rights legislation.”

US radical Yoshie Furuhashi has remarked on the disturbing parallels between Tatchell’s campaign against Islam and the anti-Muslim demagoguery of the late right-wing Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, who built a mass racist movement in the Netherlands on the basis of defending “liberal western values” against the “backward” views of Muslim migrants. Accusing Tatchell of “giving a gay obscurantist cover to the politics of intolerance”, Furuhashi pointed to the logic of Tatchell’s argument: “If Muslim voters are so vulnerable to radical Islamists’ persuasion, why not restrict their immigration to England, as the Dutch have sought to protect their ‘liberalism’ and ‘civilization’ by implementing more and more anti-immigrant measures? I won’t be surprised if Tatchell one day crosses the thin boundary between his rhetoric and Fortuyn’s.”

Although Tatchell restricts his attacks to “fundamentalists”, in practice he uses this term to cover Muslims in general and their representative organisations. He wrote in the *Weekly Worker*, 16 September 2004: “If you take a mainstream organisation like the Muslim Council of Britain, which is the umbrella organisation of all Muslim groups in this country, it has fought a tooth and nail battle, allied with the rightwing Christian Institute, to oppose every measure in favour of gay and lesbian human rights over the last decade.”

Tatchell stated that the MCB opposed an equal age of consent, supported the retention of section 28 and opposed the right of lesbian and gay couples to adopt children – as indeed it did, along with leading representatives of other faiths, including the Catholic Church, Orthodox Judaism and Hinduism. Although Tatchell knows that perfectly well, he now tries to rewrite history and depict the MCB as being in an exclusive alliance with fellow “fundamentalists” on the Christian right.

Tatchell’s *Weekly Worker* diatribe against the MCB continued: “This is the organisation that Tony Blair invites to Downing Street and gives privileged access to when it comes to consultation on social and moral issues. No gay rights organisation and no woman’s rights organisation gets invited to Downing Street for special consultations. The Muslim Council of Britain does, despite the fact that it does not believe in full human rights for women and it does not believe in any human rights for lesbians and gay men. Now, is it ‘islamo-phobic’ to say that? I do not think so.”

It is of course nonsense to suggest that the government fails to consult representative bodies

on issues affecting the rights of women or the LGBT community. As for the MCB, it is consulted by Downing Street on the same basis as other faith groups. Tatchell’s accusation that the MCB is being given preferential treatment over non-Muslim organisations carries distinct echoes of a right-wing bigot insisting that non-whites enjoy favours when it comes to the allocation of jobs and housing.

In an article in the November 2004 issue of *Labour Left Briefing*, attacking the influential Muslim scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Tatchell continued this theme, tying it to a bizarre conspiracist theory that there is a fundamentalist Muslim plan to dominate Britain:

“The objective of right-wing Muslim leaders ... is to increase the political influence of fundamentalist Islam in the UK.... Organisations like the Muslim Council of Britain are actively homophobic. They lobbied MPs to oppose the repeal of Section 28 and to support the discriminatory gay age of consent of 18. This push for political influence by rightwing Islamists in Britain is only the beginning. Muslim feminists and socialists warn of the global threat of ‘Islamofascism’. They denounce fundamentalist Islam as the religious equivalent of the BNP – but more dangerous. The BNP is an insignificant fringe party, whereas the Islamists already rule many countries.... Qaradawi’s projected return visit to London is part of a grand plan to promote fundamentalist Islam in Britain.”

It cannot be argued that Tatchell is unaware of the representative character of the MCB. As we have seen, he describes it as “the umbrella organisation of all Muslim groups in this country”. Yet he characterises the MCB as part of the “global threat of ‘Islamofascism’” and says it poses an even greater threat than the BNP.

When it comes to the BNP itself, Tatchell’s has done his best to undermine a united response to the fascist threat. In February 2006 he mounted a public attack on Unite Against Fascism for inviting the MCB to speak at its conference, which had been called to build a campaign against the BNP in the May local elections. The BNP had announced that it intended to make the elections a “referendum on Islam”, yet Tatchell seriously proposed that the MCB should be excluded from the platform on the grounds that its general secretary Iqbal Sacranie had made homophobic remarks during a radio interview.

As LGBT activist Kirsten Hearn pointed out in criticism of Tatchell’s stance: “OutRage! targets the Muslim community as homophobic when leaders of most major religions have similar views on homosexuality. Why do so? Breaking an alliance with the main faith community leaders and organisations because of their negative attitude to homosexuality would destroy an effective anti-fascist movement capable of defeating

the BNP.... To suggest we jettison the Muslim community from the anti-fascist movement at a time when the fascists are advancing by attacking Muslims is obscene.”

Tatchell's campaign against Islam in general and the MCB in particular has won the enthusiastic endorsement of right-wing Islamophobes. An article on the Western Resistance website denouncing Iqbal Sacranie and the MCB's media secretary Inayat Bunglawala as anti-semites contained the following glowing testimonial to the OutRage! leader: “Tatchell is a brave and committed individual.... I think he would have been a far better candidate for knighthood than the odious homophobe and anti-semite, Mr Sacranie.”

Another right-winger paid tribute to Tatchell's role in the struggle against the “Islamicisation” of the West, and to his backing for the March for Free Expression in particular:

“Four years after the assassination of gay Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, his warning of the threat posed to the rights of European gays and women by intolerant, anti-assimilationist Muslim immigrants is increasingly vindicated by events. Muslims have migrated in large numbers to Europe, have more children than ethnic Europeans, are disproportionately involved in crime, and increasingly insist on being governed not by the prevailing civil laws but by Muslim Shari'ah law. Many Muslim clerics in Europe look to the day when Europe will become a Muslim caliphate. Scholar Bat Ye'or has dubbed that future Europe 'Eurabia'.... Fortunately, some are refusing to surrender. On March 25 in Trafalgar Square, British gay rights activist Peter Tatchell, a self-described 'left-wing Green', joined ... a rally to defend freedom of expression.”

Worker Communist Party of Iran

Another of the speakers at the Trafalgar Square rally was Maryam Namazie of the Worker Communist Party of Iran, an ultra-left sect notorious for its frothing-at-the-mouth Islamophobia. Not only does the WPI refuse to distinguish between various Islamist currents – all are denounced as terrorists committed to stoning adulterers, amputating limbs and beheading hostages – but the group's blanket hatred of political Islamism extends to Islam as a religion, which is condemned for providing the ideological justification for terrorism and state oppression.

Thus, in a WPI television broadcast in July 2004 dealing with Yusuf al-Qaradawi's visit to London, Maryam Namazie observed that some confused people believe there are differences between moderate Islamists and extremists, drawing the following response from fellow WPI leader Bahram Soroush: “There are distinctions. As in every phenomenon – and Islam is not excluded from that – you have extreme, moderate, centre, etc. But that is not the issue. This is a question of degrees; a

relative thing. In any repugnant thing you can find things which are less repugnant than the others. Our problem is with the whole of Islam....”

A WPI front, the Organisation for Women's Liberation, issued a sympathetic statement in response to the murder of Dutch right-winger and racist Theo van Gogh, who was a friend of Pim Fortuyn, shared his political views and habitually used the word “goatfuckers” as a synonym for Muslims. The WPI treated him as a hero, declaring that: “He was murdered because he cared and dared to expose the inherent misogyny in and the brutal nature of Islam. An act which sadly, nowadays, calls for great courage.”

Not surprisingly, the WPI strongly supported the French ban on the hijab in schools. As Maryam Namazie explained: “‘My Hijab My Right’ is like saying ‘My FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), My Right’!!! The veil is an instrument to control a woman's sexuality, like FGM. It is meant to segregate women.... The veil is not just another piece of clothing – just as FGM is not just another custom. I suppose if it were to be compared with anyone's clothing it would be comparable to the Star of David pinned on Jews by the Nazis to segregate, control, repress and to commit genocide.”

On 20 March, a few days before the Trafalgar Square rally, Namazie had been the main speaker at the fifth annual Peter Tatchell Human Rights Fund dinner, where she called the general secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, a fascist: “He may be a ‘Sir’ but he is still a proponent of political Islam, the fascism of today.”

Fascists

Meanwhile, the real fascists were organising support for the Trafalgar Square rally at which Namazie was billed as a platform speaker. One supporter of the MFE later admitted that “the fascist connection snowballed and snowballed” as the campaign attracted those “for whom the free speech issue was just convenient cover for having a go at the Muslims”.

This was hardly surprising, since the BNP's line on the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy was little different from that of the MFE's official sponsors. The BNP reproduced some of the cartoons on its website, explaining that it did so in defiance of those “who cannot tolerate important western democratic values such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression and those who fail to appreciate a sense of humour”. The fascists also used one of the cartoons – the caricature of the Prophet with a bomb as a turban – on a leaflet for the local election campaign, which the BNP announced they would turn into a “referendum on Islam”.

A press release issued on 7 March by the so-called Civil Liberty campaign, a fascist front organisation headed by the British National

Party's North East organiser Kevin Scott, announced that they would be attending the Trafalgar Square rally and urged their supporters to participate. And on 23 March the BNP itself officially declared its support for the MFE:

"On Saturday in central London a wide range of political, religious and lobby groups will be taking part in a protest rally to affirm the importance of free expression in frank and honest debate, including the freedom to criticise and mock religions and faiths. The BNP, the only political party which champions free speech backs the protest and we have also been made aware that Civil Liberty supporters will be present to demonstrate against the encroaching intolerance of Marxism and militant Islamicists."

The campaign for the right to publish anti-Muslim propaganda in the name of free expression played directly into the fascists' hands. As the recent Democratic Audit/Rowntree Trust report on the BNP has noted: "The BNP portrays itself as the party of free speech.... It is this stance that allows them to campaign so viciously on race and especially against Muslims while retaining an outward air of respectability."

Nick Cohen

Predictably, journalist Nick Cohen gave the March for Free Expression a plug in his column in the *Observer*, 19 March 2006. He completely ignored the Islamophobic character of the demonstration and the growing support it was attracting from right-wingers and racists:

"Next Saturday at 2pm in Trafalgar Square, there will be a rally for freedom of expression.... Fortunately, the British National Party is nowhere to be seen [sic] and the rally will be filled with democratic leftists, Liberal Democrats, secularists and Iranian and Saudi Arabian dissidents. With the white far right out of the picture, the brown far right has barged in and Islamic fundamentalists are proposing to hold demonstrations against free speech away from central London. So, if you want to protest on Saturday, you have a choice: for free speech or against? Come on, it's not that hard a choice. All will be welcome in Trafalgar Square. Dress? Danish."

The "brown far right" was a reference to the Muslim Action Committee, a broad-based organisation formed in response to the Danish cartoons crisis, which includes the liberal Muslim magazine *Q News* among its affiliates. Indeed, MAC took an extremely conciliatory line towards the March for Free Expression, emphasising that they supported free speech but attempting to convince the organisers that this principle should be balanced against the damage caused by encouraging bigotry against minority communities. Cohen's ignorant attack on MAC echoed that of the BNP, who denounced the committee as "Islamofascists".

IHRC and LAGCAR intervene

Five days before the demonstration was due to take place, the Islamic Human Rights Commission issued an action alert, which was also publicised by BLINK. "The official purpose of the demonstration is stated to be to support freedom of expression but, in reality, it appears to be virulently Islamophobic and racist in nature ...", the IHRC statement argued. "Although ostensibly the organisers have stated that the BNP are not welcome, there is much evidence to indicate that many elements of the Far Right will be present on the day."

The IHRC pointed out that, earlier in the month, Muslim demonstrators had been arrested for carrying offensive and provocative placards protesting against the publication of the cartoons. The IHRC therefore called on its supporters "to contact the Metropolitan Police and the Mayor's Office and ask that the law be implemented equally and that any demonstrators holding offensive and provocative placards and t-shirts be similarly arrested".

The Lesbian and Gay Coalition Against Racism also issued a statement expressing its concerns about far right support for the 25 March demonstration. LAGCAR quoted a representative of the Muslim LGBT organisation Imaan, who said: "We are deeply concerned that LGBT people and organisations appear to be supporting this rally. Our members support freedom of expression and free speech, but this is being exploited by this demo which appears to be aligning elements in society which have singled out the Muslim community, under the guise of 'free expression'."

Risdon backtracks

This pressure evidently had some effect. On Thursday 23 March, two days before the demonstration, Peter Risdon suddenly began frantically backtracking on his earlier call to MFE supporters to display the cartoons. In an announcement on the MFE website Risdon stated: "At the outset, we said that displays of the Danish cartoons would be welcome on Saturday. No, let me rephrase that: At the outset, I, Peter Risdon, said the cartoons would be welcome. I am going to take full responsibility for this. I now think that was a mistake.... I now appeal to people not to bring the cartoons on T-shirts or placards."

Furthermore, the advertisement for offensive anti-Muslim t-shirts was removed from the MFE site without explanation. Not only that, but Risdon declared that "Muslims are welcome" at Saturday's protest.

Whether the Metropolitan Police had a quiet word in his shell-like we do not know. However, the main cause of the retreat was apparently an intervention by Rend Shakir, a business acquaintance of Peter Risdon's from Cambridge who had been proudly billed by Risdon as the March for

Free Expression's token Muslim speaker.

Rend Shakir is the daughter of Samir Shakir Mahmood Sumaida'ie, a former Iraqi Communist Party member turned businessman who became minister of the interior in the puppet "Governing Council" in Iraq and is now Iraqi ambassador to the UN. Rend Shakir welcomed the invasion of Iraq – "I have seen Iraqis in this country struggle to swallow tears before speaking in public, saying things like 'Thank you and thank your government for allowing me to speak freely'" – and she campaigned with the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq (a front for that country's Worker Communist Party) against plans to incorporate aspects of sharia into Iraqi law (see the article 'Stamping out Shar'ia' in *The Cambridge Student*). She is even an admirer of Donald Rumsfeld! Not only was Rend Shakir unknown in Muslim communities but she was – to put it mildly – entirely unrepresentative of Muslim views.

However, according to the Muslim Action Committee, Rend Shakir became "concerned about the tone that the March was taking and contacted MAC" – which was to her credit. She brokered discussions between Risdon and MAC, who pointed out to him that "placards depicting the cartoons would be an intimidation to Muslims and would perpetuate the BNP campaign that is very openly being conducted in the run up to the May local elections". Presumably Risdon was faced with the prospect of his single, widely-advertised, Muslim speaker publicly breaking from his campaign, plus he was probably genuinely worried that the Trafalgar Square rally would be discredited by attracting large numbers of far-rightists and open racists – so he decided to cut his losses and accept a compromise.

It should be noted in passing that none of the "left" supporters of the MFE had expressed any concern about the mounting racist and fascist support for the campaign. As we have seen, a few days earlier Nick Cohen had been blithely asserting that "the white far right" was "out of the picture". On the same day that Risdon was being panicked into an about-turn over the demonstration, Peter Tatchell published a piece on the MFE website which airily dismissed accusations of right-wing backing for the demonstration. "Sections of the left moan that the rally is being supported [by] the right", he wrote. "Well, if these socialists object so strongly why don't they organise their own demo in support of free speech?"

Needless to say, many of the right-wing and racist elements who had financed and built support for the MFE were appalled at Risdon's liberal backsliding over a free-born Briton's right to display racist caricatures. The MFE site was inundated with denunciations of the decision. Typical comments read:

"I gave you money because I thought you were standing up to the tyranny of Islam, you

snivelling coward. Either reverse course once again and welcome those cartoons back again THAT WERE THE ORIGINAL REASON FOR THIS MARCH or refund my money" ... "Another pathetic example of grovelling to Muslim 'sensibilities'" ... "I am incredibly disappointed by this – it is nothing but dhimmitude" ... "What a bunch of wimps. You have obviously caved in to the Islamic pressure groups and the Mayor of Londonistan. Another victory for Sharia law and another defeat for Liberty" ... "You guys are truly disgusting and despicable. You are worse than the terrorists and jihadists. You are the ones who provide them cover ... lacking the integrity to tell your true beliefs. You oppose free speech."

The Trafalgar Square demonstration While most of the demonstrators adhered to Risdon's call not to display the Danish cartoons, Reza Moradi – a member of the Worker Communist Party of Iran – turned up in Trafalgar Square brandishing a placard featuring some of the notorious caricatures. The examples he chose were the most explicitly racist of the series published by *Jyllands-Posten*: the one of the Prophet with a bomb as a turban and another of a wild-eyed Prophet wielding a knife, with two terrified veiled women cowering behind him – the implication of course being that Muslims are terrorists and misogynists. Just in case anyone missed the point, the latter cartoon was accompanied by the slogan "Religion – hands off women's life", implying that the oppression of women is intrinsic to Islam. "It's my freedom, everyone's freedom, to expose these pictures and encourage everyone to do the same", *New Humanist* magazine, which was another of the MFE's sponsors, reported Moradi as saying.

In the rally's opening speech, Moradi's WPI comrade Maryam Namazie delivered a characteristically hysterical rant which featured the familiar WPI theme that political Islamism in all its variants is nothing but a murder machine inspired by the religion itself: "the political Islamic movement kills, it maims, it humiliates – with Islam as its banner – and we are not even allowed to ridicule and criticise it".

Namazie denied that Islamophobia was racism "because criticisms of a religion, idea, a belief and even the practices that result from beliefs – even a phobia and hatred against beliefs have nothing to do with racism against real live human beings". According to this reasoning, of course, the BNP are not racists, as they repeatedly declare that their campaign of hatred and bigotry is directed against Islam as a religion and not against Muslims as individuals.

Namazie also delivered a second, impromptu speech after Moradi was temporarily detained by the police following a complaint about the placard he had brought. She addressed the demonstrators while brandishing the offending placard and then

handed it to the crowd urging them to pass it round and display it. They were only too happy to oblige.

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society asked rhetorically why the government had opposed freedom of expression by bringing forward the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill. He answered: "Perhaps a clue lies in the fact that just before the election the Home Secretary wrote to selected mosques ... making the party political point that it was the opposition's fault that the legislation had – at that stage – been rejected." In other words, it was just an attempt to appease Muslims. The fact that the government had responded sympathetically to the concerns of Muslim communities was evidently reprehensible by definition as far as Wood was concerned.

Peter Tatchell got a good reception when he attacked unnamed mainstream Muslim leaders for supposedly issuing death threats against a liberal imam who had been due to speak at his fund-raising dinner the previous week, and when he criticised the police for failing to take action against Muslim extremists. One observer reported that Tatchell did leaven this with some progressive-sounding anti-racist rhetoric, "at which point he started to get heckles from people demanding that he stick to free speech, not go on about racism".

Sean Gabb spoke on behalf of the Libertarian Alliance, taking the opportunity to advocate the "principle" that racists should have the right to free speech, even to the extent of inciting hatred against minority ethnic communities. As a *Socialist Worker* correspondent reported, Gabb "defended the rights of BNP leader Nick Griffin, Holocaust denier David Irving and disgraced racist lecturer Frank Ellis to 'speak their mind'. The crowd cheered him."

By the time Gabb got to speak, the demonstration had dwindled to about 150 rain-soaked reactionaries, as other protestors retreated to the local pubs. At its height, the crowd numbered no more than 350 – significantly less than the "thousands" confidently predicted by Tatchell a couple of days earlier. Some of the more mainstream defenders of "free expression" were no doubt put off by the likelihood of far right participation in the event and had stayed away. On the other hand, many of the racists who had initially been attracted to the protest had been antagonised by Risdon's appeal not to display the cartoons and boycotted the event.

Nevertheless, the organised far right did participate in the protest. The BNP reported that the demonstrators included "a delegation from Civil Liberty, the organisation established earlier this year to defend the rights of patriotic Britons.... About 40 CL supporters attended the protest rally and handed out literature which was well received by other defenders of our fundamental liberties." The same claim was repeated on the Civil Liberty

website, which published photographs of the demonstration.

Islamophobes in denial

Writing for the *Guardian's* Comment is Free in the aftermath of the Trafalgar Square demonstration, Peter Tatchell claimed to have been traduced by his "far left" critics:

"Not content with doing nothing to defend the right to free speech, large sections of the far left have gone into overdrive to depict those who supported last Saturday's Freedom of Expression rally in Trafalgar Square as cryptofascists and neo-Nazi sympathisers. In a storm of lies and misrepresentations worthy of Josef Goebbels, the ultra-left propaganda machine has insinuated that a mini-Nuremberg took place, flush with supporters of the BNP promoting racist and anti-Muslim hatred. Those attending the rally have been variously condemned by the far left as 'supporting', 'colluding with' or 'endorsing' the BNP. This is plain bloody nonsense."

As a description of leftist criticisms of Tatchell's participation in the MFE, this was certainly nonsense. In reality, our point was that Tatchell had entered into an alliance with right-wingers and racists in defence of the "freedom" to publish anti-Muslim caricatures, and that the MFE had consequently attracted the support and participation of the BNP.

Tatchell, however, furiously denied that there was any far right involvement. "Contrary to the lies and scaremongering of the far left, there was no BNP presence at Saturday's rally ...", he insisted. "There were no union jack flags, and no leaflets or placards attacking Muslims or promoting fascist ideas." Tatchell's lieutenant Brett Lock chimed in with the claims that "on the day, the BNP were nowhere in sight" and that the fascists "were explicitly banned from the march".

From which we can only conclude that leading members of OutRage! are in serious need of an eye test. Even leaving aside the fascists' own admission that their members participated in the rally, photographers registered the presence of demonstrators waving union jacks and holding Civil Liberty propaganda. Moreover, the latter was openly distributed to the crowd without any interference by the stewards, notwithstanding Lock's claim of a ban on the BNP. As for the placards attacking Muslims, they were also plainly in evidence – although, to be fair, it wasn't the fascists of the BNP who brought them, but Tatchell's allies in the Worker Communist Party.

Conclusion

Writing on the Danish cartoons crisis in the *Guardian*, 4 February 2005, Gary Younge pointed to the double standards that are applied when it comes to offensive racist illustrations:

"In January 2002 the *New Statesman* published

a front page displaying a shimmering golden Star of David impaling a union flag, with the words 'A kosher conspiracy?' The cover was widely and rightly condemned as anti-semitic. It's not difficult to see why. It played into vile stereotypes of money-grabbing Jewish cabals out to undermine the country they live in.... A group calling itself Action Against Anti-Semitism marched into the *Statesman's* offices, demanding a printed apology. One eventually followed. The then editor, Peter Wilby, later confessed that he had not appreciated 'the historic sensitivities' of Britain's Jews. I do not remember talk of a clash of civilisations in which Jewish values were inconsistent with the western traditions of freedom of speech or democracy. Nor do I recall editors across Europe rushing to reprint the cover in solidarity."

If in 2002 a bunch of right-wing "libertarians" had called a demonstration in support of the *New Statesman's* decision to publish this anti-semitic illustration, with the declared aim of upholding the freedom to insult Britain's Jewish community, would Tatchell, Harris, Namazie et al have participated? Would they have happily joined a crowd parading around Trafalgar Square brandishing placards featuring the *NS* front cover or a caricature of a hook-nosed Jew counting money, on the grounds that they were defending the basic democratic right to ridicule and offend? Would Nick Cohen have devoted a section of his *Observer* column to applauding the demonstration as a principled stand in support of free speech? These questions of course answer themselves.

It should be obvious that the position of genuine leftists or liberals on the issue of free speech is fundamentally different from that of the political right, whether they are open Nazis like the BNP and Civil Liberty or non-fascist hard-right org-

anisations like the Freedom Association and the Libertarian Alliance. For such organisations, "free expression" means the "liberty" to incite hatred and bigotry against minority communities and, more generally, to defend the "freedom" of the oppressor against the oppressed. In relation to racism in general all leftists and liberals would understand this point, but a number of them lose sight of it when the victims are Muslims.

The irony here is that one of the repeated themes of the pro-war "left" – people like Nick Cohen or the neocon bloggers at Harry's Place – has been to accuse the anti-war movement of being in a block with the "right", by which they mean Muslim organisations. Yet they themselves evidently have no problem forming a block with the white Islamophobic right. Peter Tatchell declares unceasingly that in opposing war or fighting fascism it is permissible for the left to build alliances only with liberal Muslims. But when it is a question of attacking Islam he is happy to share a platform with the likes of Sean Gabb.

Since the launch of the "war on terror", the demonisation of Islam has become an important ideological weapon in justifying US attacks on majority-Muslim countries. It is evident that, under the impact of this imperialist propaganda, a section of liberal and "left" opinion has lost its political and moral bearings and is now prepared to form an anti-Muslim alliance with right-wingers and even outright racists. With US imperialism showing no sign of abandoning its programme of military aggression – at the time of writing, it has Iran firmly in its sights – exposing and combating this rotten alliance in all its forms, and defending Muslim communities against it, will remain a challenge for the real left for the foreseeable future. ■

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# REVIEW ARTICLE

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## A Kick Up the 'Arris

Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Free Press, 2006. Paperback, 336pp, £12.99.

### Reviewed by Doug Lowe

#### Introduction

With tedious predictability some people continue to advance their careers (and, no doubt, bank balances) with works of this nature. Meanwhile around the world millions suffer misery, broken lives and death directly or indirectly as a consequence of the actions of the US government and its allies.

Of course, not only do people have to pay for the consequences of the supposedly disinterested and self-sacrificing generosity of American capitalism and its friends. As a minor but additional insult they also have to endure the criticisms of Harris and his comfortable and cosseted book-writing colleagues for actually resenting being attacked, bombed and tortured in the name of freedom and democracy. This resentment inevitably sometimes expresses itself in violent lashing out (or overt displays of sympathy for this). This inflames these intellectuals to berate them further, ignoring the real causes of these responses, in favour of more convenient explanations. To Harris the fundamental reason for attacks on the US and Israel is a profound loathing of “modernity” and a natural propensity of Muslims for violence fuelled by Islamic dogma.

#### Religious beliefs

In the first part of the book Harris outlines the fundamental irrationality of religious beliefs. Some of the phrases and examples he uses are telling and likely to warm the hearts of godless Bolsheviks everywhere. Where he differs from much of secularist thought is his refusal to exempt “moderate” religious practice from criticism. He is equally, if not more, scathing about this than about those who hold “extreme” fundamentalist views. He arg-

ues that the latter at least have the virtue of being honest, accurately interpreting the sacred text (of whatever religious persuasion) when dealing with those who do not follow its teachings, i.e. death to those who don't follow my god and his pronouncements. To Harris, moderates have adopted a “pick and mix” attitude to their own beliefs, combining the absurdities of religious faith, with a tacit acknowledgement that the world has changed substantially since the sacred texts were written. For Harris, these “moderates” provide a useful function as an ideological bedrock for their more extreme brethren. The credibility of “moderate” religious views remains mostly unchallenged, despite the fact that these are, at their core, the same irrational ones as the “extremists”, i.e. a belief in “God”.

This may well be the case but Harris eventually takes his initial argument well away from the innocent secular humanism that (at first glance) he seems to be championing. In addition, after spending so much time and effort ridiculing the irrationality of religious faith he then ends up championing some form of Buddhist mysticism. The temptation to point out that he lives in California is too great to resist.

Harris confuses cause and effect in his emphasis on the “sacred texts” as catalysts for “religiously” inspired violence. One reviewer of the book argued that “determined mass murderers can find a rationale for killing in any handy text that comes along.... Reasoning backward under the impression that the destructive results of this or that piece of writing invalidates its purchase on our serious attention could make ‘E=mc<sup>2</sup>’ the most taboo phrase in the language.”<sup>1</sup>

The reviewer seems to be using this argument

to imply the continuing validity of aspects of holy books but the point he makes does have wider applicability in undermining generally the notion that mere words on a page have some magical ability to propel people into particular types of action, without any other mediating factors.

*Mein Kampf* might explain Hitler's mindset but it could hardly be held responsible for the eventual Nazi rise to power. Without the myriad political, economic and social circumstances that led to the (not inevitable) victory of fascism in Germany, that book would have been a mildly interesting but minor footnote in a 20th century history of Germany.

#### Islam and 'Western values'

Harris expresses concern about American Christian fundamentalists and their influence at the highest levels of government. But his attack on Islam is much more substantial and sustained. In addition, this is bolstered by evidence provided by people like Alan Dershowitz, Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis (right-wing pro-Israeli cheerleaders for American imperialism). Harris also cites Paul Berman as responsible for a "beautiful primer" on totalitarianism (p.134). Berman claims leftist credentials but his book *Terror and Liberalism* actually peddles ahistorical, crude and inaccurate comparisons between so-called Islamic "totalitarianism" and German Nazism (which is what Harris was referring to).

Incidentally, Bernard Lewis has recently been convicted by a French court for denial of the Armenian holocaust and (like Dershowitz) he still won't disassociate himself from the infamous Joan Peters book *From Time Immemorial*, a Zionist fiction that airbrushes the Palestinians from existence before the arrival of the Zionist settlers, an intellectual sleight-of-hand worthy of Uncle Joe himself.

Now, apparently, the greatest threat to mankind is a global bloc of fanatical Muslims. Set against this are the countries loosely termed the "West", deemed virtually the sole champions of the values of liberalism, freedom and democracy. This may come as a surprise to anyone over the last few centuries who has been on the receiving end of various "Western" imperialisms or been embroiled in two world wars, both of which began in Europe (as did the vilest ideology of all, fascism).

In practice, to the US rulers, terms like "liberal values" and "democracy" are directly equated with US society, in particular the glories of free market capitalism. The gross inequalities, poverty, endemic violence and racism are somewhat at odds with this flattering self-delusion.

In truth, these "liberal values" Harris refers to have been a moveable feast for US administrations, to be wheeled on when they suit the dictates of the American propaganda machine and its apologists. Or ignored when they are used against America in an attempt to restrain their military (and

other) interventions or close relationships with unpleasant regimes.

#### 'Clash of civilisations'

Whilst hiding behind some pretence at objectivity, it is clear that Harris subscribes to Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilisations"/barbarians at the gates apocalyptic nonsense, cleverly associating Muslims automatically with Islam and all Muslims as part of a "civilisation".

He is quite explicit about this - "We are at war with Islam" (p.109). This follows soon after an outrageous assertion in passing: "terrorism of the sort that has become so *commonplace* [my italics] among Muslims" (p.109). Later, he states: "Whether or not one likes Huntington's formulation, one thing is clear: the evil that has finally reached our shores is not merely the evil of terrorism. It is the evil of religious faith *at the moment of its political ascendancy* [my italics]." (p.130) These absurd exaggerations are pre-figured by an earlier remark, "Millions among us, even now, are quite willing to die for our unjustified beliefs, and *millions more* [my italics], it seems, are willing to kill for them" (p.64).

Even more sinisterly he slips into "fifth column" arguments, where ostensibly "moderate" Muslims living in the West are hiding their true feelings (contempt for "Western" values) behind a convenient cloak of "liberalism". ("We should not mistake the 'tolerance' of political, economic, and numerical weakness for genuine liberalism", p.115.) It doesn't take much imagination to guess how these views might provide easy justification for any violence or intimidation meted out to Muslims (or those who just "look Arabic").

The logic of this for Harris is unequivocally spelt out: "Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them.... There is, in fact, no talking to some people. If they cannot be captured, and they often cannot, otherwise tolerant people may be justified killing them in self-defence. This is what the United States attempted in Afghanistan, and it is what we and other Western powers are bound to attempt, and at even greater cost to ourselves and to innocents abroad" (pp.52-3).

Yes - that's what he said - it would be ethical to kill for just believing certain things, you don't actually have to do anything! Reading the first part of the quote, comrades might have started rubbing their hands with glee at the prospect of Sam Harris leading a 21st century International Brigade of atheists to finish off Bush, Rumsfeld and US Christian fundamentalists. Sadly, the last sentence would clarify, and the disillusion would be complete when, in a recent interview, Harris lines up with Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell's assessments of the global situation!<sup>2</sup>

The idea that there is, or ever likely to be, some monolithic construct based on Islam is an absurd-

ity. Even less likely is a sinister global threat from such an entity.<sup>3</sup>

#### 'Benign dictatorship'

Harris refers to a variety of problems in many countries: "This is not to deny that there are problems with democracy, particularly when it is imposed prematurely on societies that have high birth rates, low levels of literacy, profound ethnic and religious factionalism, and unstable economies", which might necessitate "a benevolent despotism ... [as] a necessary stage in the political development of many societies" (p.240). At no point does Harris suggest the role of Western nations and their businesses and banks in causing or exacerbating these problems – these countries seem to develop alone socially, economically and politically, isolated from external influences.

Harris asserts the "right" of the US to intervene in other countries – in his view the transformation of certain countries to a "democracy" will require a period of "benign dictatorship" – "if it cannot emerge from within a state, it must be imposed from without" (p.151). He adds: "While this may seem an exceedingly arrogant doctrine, it appears we have no alternatives" (p.151). To support this he approvingly cites an article by right-wing commentator Robert Kaplan ('Supremacy by Stealth'): "[Kaplan] has made a strong case that interventions of this sort should be entirely *covert* and will, for the foreseeable future, be the responsibility of the United States to carry out" (p.266). Ah, the burden of the liberal imperialist. In practice, I suspect that "benign dictatorships" and "benevolent despotisms" will closely equate to compliant local elites prepared to do Washington's bidding.

In the many cases of US intervention, the regimes it supported could hardly have been said to usher in eras of benevolent anything. Chile in 1973 springs to mind, but contrary to Harris's formula of transformations of societies *towards* democracy a parliamentary democracy there was replaced by a brutal dictatorship. Perhaps it doesn't count as a democracy if socialists are involved. That seems to be a common factor in motivating numerous instances of US interference in even the democratic processes of other countries.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, the US administration and people like Blair have been spouting lies about Chávez, elected democratically on several occasions. For hypocritical nonsense by the US and Blair about "flouting international law", read "don't help the poor with your oil, give it to the caring, socially concerned US oil companies". US and British criticism of Chad's recent nationalisation of its oilfields has been strangely muted. Perhaps not so strangely, since Chad's President intends to spend the proceeds on military supplies rather than helping to ease poverty in his own country. More importantly, unlike the Bolivian and Venezuelan cases, it is not detrimental to US oil

companies' interests.<sup>5</sup>

At odds with Harris's cosy view of the benign guiding hand of the US, there is the reality: "With its network of bases, America has extended an umbrella of 'protection' around the globe. But America's military protection comes with consequences. The military has been used to train local intelligence and counter-insurgency agencies around the world whose record of human rights abuses is notorious.... Wars between countries, civil wars and local martial law have all been facilitated by the global role of the American military in ensuring America's national security; surrogate wars, repression and denial of human rights become a necessary part of America's self-defence."<sup>6</sup>

For Harris the list of pretexts justifying American meddling elsewhere appears then to be fairly extensive. I hope anyone who beats an American team into second place in any world sporting competition is ready for the possible consequences if Harris had his way. Perhaps his parents wouldn't let him play Cowboys and Indians or Risk as a child and he never got it out of his system.

The willingness of the US to repeatedly act throughout the world in its own narrow interests is complemented by its refusal to engage in multi-national co-operation on key aspects of global concern – it has "consistently opposed ... human rights initiatives.... It is one of only two countries ... that has still not ratified the 1989 ... UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It also held back ratifications on the treaty to ban landmines and the treaty to establish an International Criminal Court".<sup>7</sup>

#### America: the Muslims' friend

In a note (p.241) Harris approvingly refers to a remark made by Paul Berman: "[Berman] also points out that most of our conflicts of recent years have been fought in *defense* of various Muslim populations." Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and the Balkans are cited, as if America was solely motivated by altruistic concerns, rather than their own interests. It may be that sometimes people do benefit (directly or indirectly) from American involvement but that is likely to be incidental to strategic US aims.

In the Balkans their contribution included deliberate bombing of numerous non-military targets (including the needless destruction wrought on a heavily-populated Belgrade). Self-righteous justifications about humanitarian motives are contradicted by the price paid by innocent civilians there.

On the subjects of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia I've only one thing to say. Oil.

Harris adds to this list "our original support of the mujahideen in Afghanistan". He is rather coy, though, about revealing to his readers the key role of one Osama bin Laden in the American-financed and equipped mujahideen, extreme Islam-

ic fanatics who brutally ousted a Soviet-backed regime which, however imperfect, did attempt to modernise the country. America, for its own strategic/economic/political interests backed the alternative – which eventually paved the way for the Taliban regime. A lucrative pipeline deal with the Taliban subsequently became less secure. Only then did the Americans suddenly realise how unacceptable the Taliban were!

#### Chomsky and Sudan

Another country with a large Muslim population is Sudan. Referring to Clinton's bombing of the pharmaceutical factory there in 1998, Harris attempts to take on what he calls the "Left's unreason". To Harris the arch-exponent of this is Noam Chomsky (one of the most consistent and articulate critics of American foreign policy). Soon after this section starts, Harris says: "I would like to concede many of his [i.e. Chomsky's] points.... There is no doubt that the United States has much to atone for, both domestically and abroad. In this respect, we can more or less swallow Chomsky's thesis whole.... We have surely done some terrible things in the past. Undoubtedly, we are poised to do terrible things in the future. Nothing I have written in this book should be construed as a denial of these facts ..." (p.140). This stark acknowledgement of reality is unfortunately then followed by a diversion into the realms of fantasy and wish fulfilment. He actually agrees then with Chomsky's main criticisms, bar one!

The only criticism Harris throws at Chomsky is his unflattering comparison of the Sudan bombing to 9/11. Chomsky's argument was that the number of 9/11 deaths had "moral equivalence" with the likely effects of the destruction of so many vital medical supplies. Harris counter-argument rests solely on the assertion that the 9/11 bombers intended to kill thousands, Clinton didn't.

This ignores two key points. Firstly, in carrying out the bombing the US was flagrantly violating international law, again. Secondly, the bombing was not a result of flawed intelligence or a tragic mistake but a knowingly deliberate act of terrorism on a false pretext. It was a result of two factors – a cynical ploy by Clinton to divert pressures away from his domestic problems and broadly a crude threat to the Sudanese government to be more compliant to US interests in the region, not the least of these relating to Sudan's large oilfields. The bombing was not an isolated act but part of a concerted effort by the US to undermine the Sudanese government until it bowed to Washington's dictates. As with other countries that have dared to act independently, the fomenting of civil war and economic sanctions have also been used.<sup>8</sup> So much for Clinton, erstwhile darling of gullible liberals everywhere (if that isn't an obvious tautology).

Apparently, Chomsky's political views "pre-

vent him from making the most basic moral distinctions – between types of violence, and the variety of human purposes that give rise to them" (p.139). Furthermore, he also chides Chomsky for not acknowledging "the difference between intending to kill a child, because of the effect you hope to produce on its parents (...'terrorism'), and inadvertently killing a child in an attempt to capture or kill an avowed child murderer (...'collateral damage'). In both cases a child has died.... But the ethical status of the perpetrators ... could hardly be more distinct" (p.146).

In the light of the real motivations behind American military interventions, this logic is utterly flawed. It is also closely followed by some irrelevant comparisons with the risks involved for children going on roller coasters, travelling in cars or skiing. Actually, in the light of a 1999 UNESCO report that estimated that half a million Iraqi children under five years of age died as a result of US-led sanctions on Iraq, Harris's remarks concerning children are flippant, callous and offensive beyond words.

The implications of Harris's remarks are that the invasion of Iraq and sundry other military actions by the US had the purest of motives and the most honourable of intentions. In fact, he had earlier made it quite apparent that this is what he thinks – referring to America as a "well-intentioned giant" (p.142). I kid you not. The national equivalent of the "Honey Monster" going to help someone who's fallen over, only to accidentally tread on their toes while doing so. This pathetic assertion is offered with no evidence at all. Contradictory evidence is overwhelming, of course.

Even then, after stating that "where ethics are concerned, intentions are everything" (p.147), in the attached note he adds a qualification: "Intentions matter, but they are not all that matters" (p.265). The only "unreason" that is going on here is not of the Left variety. Intellectually, his attack on Chomsky is like a kitten taking on a grizzly bear.

#### Nazis

It's quite a coincidence that American concern for human rights seems to be particularly acute when the countries concerned are where access to large quantities of oil have been most problematic for them.

On Afghanistan, Harris dutifully trots out the Bush administration line about freeing Afghanis from an oppressive theocracy. Of course, propaganda is most effective when a half-truth. The Taliban regime certainly was an oppressive one but, given their continued support for a variety of regimes world-wide with appalling human rights records, Washington's claims about an overriding concern for freedom and democracy lacks any credibility. The estimated 20,000 deaths in Afghanistan as a result of the US invasion are

a salutary reminder of the true price paid, as is the aftermath – the degeneration into factional jostling for power as civil society nears collapse. Way to go.

As the hostile gaze of US warlords and their willing stooges settles on each new *bête noire*, the shameless empty rhetoric and crude political abuse (devoid of any substance or basis in reality) pours out again and again. Milosevic, bin Laden, Hussein as the “new Hitler”; the Serbs, the Taliban<sup>9</sup> and the Baathists as Nazis. In the *Sunday Telegraph* (4 April 1999) Blair talked of the NATO action in the Balkans as “a battle between good and evil; between civilisation and barbarity; between democracy and dictatorship”. Blah, blah, blah.

These new Hitlers have had better survival instincts than their apparent role model. As I write (May 2006), along with Bush and Blair, not one of them has been held accountable for their crimes. Milosevic went for years avoiding punishment before his death and Hussein continues to play to the gallery. Bin Laden is still at large – the US don't seem to be in any great hurry to actually catch him. Could it be that they'll let him remain free until his beloved Arsenal win the Champions League? Or, as old friends and supporters of both Hussein and bin Laden, they're less than enthusiastic to deal with them both for sentimental reasons. Maybe the Bush/Blair road-show has already moved on to the next Hitler/Dr Evil (certainly Rumsfeld has, comparing Chávez to Hitler at the National Press Club in Washington earlier this year).

#### American interference abroad

Harris acknowledges the less than honourable aspects of past American behaviour but for him these are largely outweighed by the Americans' motives – to him they have usually interfered in other countries affairs with the best of intentions! The grubby reality that this interference is due to the strategic economic and geopolitical interests of the US ruling class is never countenanced. In short: “If it doesn't like a country's economic policies, it crushes them using the WTO and IMF. And if that doesn't work, it imposes sanctions or simply arranges to overthrow its leaders in a coup (Iran, Chile, Guatemala). Authoritarian countries whose leaders are tyrants and brutes who trample on human rights are called friends and allies if they have the right economic policies (Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, El Salvador).”<sup>10</sup>

He refers to “the horrors that Americans perpetrated as recently as 1968, at My Lai.... This is about as bad as human beings are capable of behaving” (p.144). It doesn't even occur to him that the massacre would never have happened if the Americans hadn't been in Vietnam in the first place. Following this reference to My Lai, he quickly adds “But what distinguishes us from many of our enemies is that this indiscriminate

violence appalls us.” (p.144).

But perhaps not “discriminate” violence. Consider this: “in its role as ‘global policeman’ it [the US] targets civilian infrastructures: water treatment facilities, power plants, dams, flood control systems, irrigation, water storage, pumping stations, medical research centres, baby-food factories, sewage facilities, bridges, transportation facilities, petrochemical plants, fertiliser factories, auto-plants, as well as hospitals, schools, Red Cross buildings, residential neighbourhoods, embassies and, in the Afghanistan war, even a foreign news bureau. In one major campaign lasting over ten years – the Vietnam War – it carpet-bombed three countries (North Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos), killing at least three million civilians.... At the end of the Gulf War, it bombed an Iraqi convoy and buried alive 150,000 conscripts when they had surrendered and were no threat.”<sup>11</sup> War Crimes Tribunal anyone?

More recent evidence from Iraq suggests though that the behaviour of some American troops has scarcely improved since My Lai. An article by Patrick Cockburn in the *Independent* (‘US troops investigated over Iraqi massacres’, 22 March 2006) refers to: “The growing evidence of retaliatory killings of unarmed Iraqi families, often including children, by US soldiers seemingly bent on punishing Iraqis after an attack.... US troops have been notorious among Iraqis for their willingness to shoot any Iraqi they see in the aftermath of an insurgent attack.”<sup>12</sup>

And so it has been for all imperialisms down the centuries. The truth is that, historically, the US military has been a dangerous cocktail of the most advanced technology, not infrequent displays of military incompetence and a penchant for excessive violence and mindless brutality. This is fuelled by racist fantasies about the inherent superiority of Americans.

#### Torture

Harris states that “if we are willing to drop bombs ... we should be willing to torture ... if we are unwilling to torture, we should be unwilling to wage modern war” (p.197). This argument is a double-edged sword. It could be used to strengthen a pacifist case but, equally, to justify the mistreatment of prisoners. In Harris's case it is the latter that holds sway since he has argued elsewhere that “collateral damage” could be justified because US intentions are for the best.

But Harris's argument uses a false dichotomy. The Geneva Convention was at least an acknowledgement that, although other spheres of war produced innocent victims on a much greater scale, this didn't excuse the maltreatment or murder of those taken prisoner. Now, of course, even the Geneva Convention (however limited) is deemed an unwarranted restraint on the brutal imperatives of US and British imperialism – by some

people in US ruling circles and British apologists for inhuman behaviour like the unspeakable Blair-ite Reid.

Lined up with these are people like Harris who states: "I believe that I have successfully argued for the use of torture in any circumstance in which we would be willing to cause collateral damage. Paradoxically, this equivalence has not made the practice of torture more acceptable to me" (p.198). This reservation gets short shrift, though, soon afterwards – he concludes: "Given what many of us believe about the exigencies of our war on terrorism, the practice of torture would seem to be not only permissible but necessary" (p.199).

You would be hard-pressed to come across a more convoluted mealy-mouthed pseudo-ethical argument for barbaric behaviour than Harris's thoughts on the ethics and morality of torture.

It's as if the purity of American intentions has only been sullied recently by the unfortunate and reluctant requirements of fighting dirty – Harris says "we are civilised, in large measure, *because* [his italics] we do not practice it [i.e. torture]" (p.198). In the interests of consistency he has to use the euphemism "coercion" to refer to torture by US and Israeli interrogators (p.287), in order to sustain the fiction that torture doesn't happen at the moment but is only a future option likely to be forced on the US by necessity. But direct and indirect American involvement in the use of torture has a track record of several decades in places like South America.<sup>13</sup> The recent incidence of so-called "rendition" flights facilitating torture by others is merely the latest instalment in the complicity of the US (and pond life like Blair) in this barbarism.

To put in context the arguments of Harris, Dershowitz et al., "imagine an Arab ... arguing the case for torturing American prisoners; think of the explosion of comments about fundamentalist barbarism and disrespect for human rights that would cause".<sup>14</sup>

So this then is the moral high ground of "Western" liberal values? In reality these are readily dispensed with in the interests of American realpolitik. In practice, the philosophy is actually "might is right". The Geneva Convention, international law and UN resolutions only apply to America's enemies. Rights for prisoners of war can be circumvented by merely criminalising anyone that fights against them. Harris gives this attitude credence.

He makes a brief sneering reference to the "scrofulous young men" at Guantánamo Bay, "many of whom were caught in the very act of trying to kill our soldiers" (p.194). What, in a war, surely not? Harris refers to the likely guilt of most of them, which seems, for him, to legitimise their appalling treatment (despite the fact that the Americans seem reluctant to openly provide evidence of this guilt). Harris subsequently displays a lib-

eral conscience (in the notes section at the end of the book), indicating disquiet about their indefinite detention and lack of access to legal counsel (p.286). In the context though of much of what he says, this is a fairly discrete and ineffectual brake on his main train of thought.

#### Nuclear war

At one point (p.129) Harris morphs into Barry Goldwater, seriously raising the suggestion of a pre-emptive nuclear strike by the US against any "Islamic" country in possession of nuclear weapons (or, of course, claimed by the US/UK to have them!). As with the issue of torture, this is couched in terms of a supposed cool and rational discussion of options and scenarios. In effect, though, what this does is giving subtle credence to the unthinkable.

As if the stakes haven't been raised enough by the new and dangerous implications of "pre-emptive" strikes on Afghanistan and Iraq. Pre-emptive strikes are not entirely new, of course. They were the strategic military modus operandi of other rogue nations in the mid-Twentieth Century.

Despite the supposed contemporary nuclear threat from "rogue states" and "terrorist" groups replacing the USSR in US demonology, there has still been only one country that has ever used nuclear weapons against civilian populations (twice).

In a typical dramatic flourish Harris declares: "We can no longer ignore the fact that ... our neighbors are now armed with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons" (p.14). Well, Mexico and Canada's neighbour certainly is. Apart from 30,000 tons of chemical weapons, the US "has the world's largest stockpile of smallpox, anthrax, and other biological weapons ... [and] has resolutely refused to support any UN initiative that would ban the development of biological and chemical weapons, or agree to any measures to strengthen a biological weapons treaty".<sup>15</sup>

It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that the main threat to the survival of the planet from nuclear (or, for that matter, environmental) devastation is the one country most paranoid about others on this matter.

And yet Harris also says: "I suspect that if our media did not censor the more disturbing images of war, our moral sentiments would receive a correction on two fronts; first, we would be more motivated by the horrors visited upon us by our enemies.... Second, if we did not conceal the horrible reality of collateral damage from ourselves, we would be far less likely to support the dropping of 'dumb' bombs, or even 'smart' ones." (pp.286-7).

On several occasions the notes section is used to express qualms about the general thesis he espouses in the core of the book. What causes this apparent contradiction? A cynic would suggest

that he can parade a conscience for the benefit of a more liberal minded readership in the section of a book traditionally the least frequented. Perhaps, though, these inconsistencies merely mirror the contradictory arguments and flaws that riddle the book. It may be a symptom of classic liberal “confusion” – after all, how do you square remarks like the above with the nuclear brinkmanship and comments in favour of torture?

#### Israel/Palestine

Presently, of course, the two main conflicts in the Middle East are in Israel/Palestine and Iraq. Harris’s coverage of both is through the distorted and restricted perspective of religion.

The book opens with a description of a suicide bombing, which we are meant to assume is being undertaken by a Palestinian in Israel. For Harris any other motive than religion is only worthy of passing consideration. After all, what other than a “religious impulse” could have possibly driven a young Palestinian to blow himself and Israelis up?! To Harris “the world is filled with poor, uneducated, and exploited peoples who do not commit acts of terrorism” (p.109) – an absurd point in itself but one that enables Harris to argue that Middle Eastern Muslims commit terror because of religious fanaticism. Not because Palestinians have been terrorised off their own land, forced into refugee camps, bombed, shot, tortured and bulldozed.

Harris concedes that there may be other possible causes for “Muslim violence” – the “painful history of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza ... the collusion of Western powers with corrupt dictatorships ... the endemic poverty and lack of economic opportunity that now plague the Arab world” (p.109). You would think there were plenty of very good reasons there but no, Harris believes that we should “treat them, only to place them safely on the shelf” (p.109). In other words casually and brutally dismiss the real cause of so much misery and the fact that Palestinians have the temerity to actually fight back, lacking as they do the much more acceptable killing tools of helicopter gunships, jets and tanks.

The history of Palestinian oppression is ignored, apart from that passing reference to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, although he forgoes to mention that not only is it an illegal one but largely the reason for Palestinian “terrorism”. This further damages the book’s credibility, although to acknowledge the Israeli behaviour as a key reason for the Palestinian response would fatally undermine his argument about the main motivation of Palestinian suicide bombers.

So the cause of Palestinian violence has to be shoehorned into the root/dual cause of Islamic faith/anti-semitism. After all, as he approvingly quotes Dershowitz: “no other nation in history faced with comparable challenges has ever adhered to a higher standard of human rights, been more

sensitive to the safety of innocent civilians, tried harder to operate under the rule of law, or been willing to take more risks for peace.” Yes, he’s talking about Israel. Harris adds: “The Israelis have shown a degree of restraint in their use of violence that ... no Muslim society would contemplate today” (p.135).

Both his and Dershowitz’s comments are grotesque and contemptible, bearing in mind the real record of Israeli behaviour towards the Palestinians.<sup>16</sup> The vastly disproportionate deaths and injuries inflicted on Palestinian civilians compared with Israeli casualties, the estimated 17,500 killed as a result of the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 (including the Sabra and Shatila massacres), the attack at Jenin, the widespread and deliberate killing of innocent civilians and routine torturing of Palestinian prisoners by the Israeli Defence Force (a chilling Orwellian misnomer). These are just the tip of the iceberg of countless acts logged by neutral human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights. The IDF’s contempt for human life merely mirrors Harris’s dehumanising of Muslims everywhere.

But as America’s special friend in the Middle East the Israelis have obviously been given dispensation (or, on occasion, given themselves sole dispensation) to flout any humanitarian rules, international laws and numerous UN resolutions.

Of course, by endorsing Dershowitz’s view of Israel, Harris implies that the Palestinians have really little to complain about – so their resorting to violence is unreasonable and irrational, the only possible motive therefore must be an irrational one. Hence the “religious” angle.

It is curious why so many Americans appear to turn a blind eye to the behaviour of the Israelis towards the Palestinians, despite the extensive evidence. Perhaps there is an uncomfortable confluence between the origins of the modern nations of the US and Israel, ones whose self-reverential myths disguise a dishonourable reality.

Native American writer Jimmie Durham has suggested that “America has from the beginning had a nostalgia for itself because of actual guilt. The United States, he argues, was the first settler colony to establish itself *against*, and through the *denial* of, its original inhabitants.... ‘The great myth’, as later Peter Mathiesson calls it, used to justify and sustain the seizure of America, is that what was ‘discovered’ was a vast wilderness.... The earliest settlers wrote they had found a new Eden, the land of Canaan.... The freedom that the settlers appropriated for themselves is directly related to the freedom that they denied to the original inhabitants ...”<sup>17</sup>

From the start, negative descriptions of Native Americans accompanied the self-mythologising. If there is a kernel of truth in this, how close this reflects the Zionist colonisation of Palestine – the

terrorist tactics and ethnic cleansing, followed by negative stereotypes of Palestinians and the subsequent distorted pseudo-historical justifications. The phoney “empty wilderness” assertions in the US case mirror the fallacies perpetrated by contemporary pro-Zionist historians about the virtual non-existence of indigenous populations in Palestine before the arrival of Zionists.

#### Anti-semitism

In Harris’s book examples of Arabic anti-semitism are emphasised, although anti-Arabic racism in the US and Israel is blithely ignored. I was waiting in vain for Harris to follow his own predilections and assert that the decades of suffering inflicted by the Israelis was due to an irrational religiously-motivated hatred of Arabs.

Harris points out some unpleasant manifestations of anti-semitism (see p.264, notes 33 and 35) but it’s revealing that these don’t refer to anti-semitism by Palestinians but from other Arabic countries. Also, his sources are M.B. Zuckerman’s *Graffiti on History’s Walls* and the Dershowitz book *The Case for Israel*. Both of these contain a variety of exaggerations and distortions relating to the extent of anti-semitism, which is cynically associated with any significant degree of criticism of Israel.<sup>18</sup> Harris also repeats Dershowitz’s proven falsehoods about the Mufti of Jerusalem in the 1930s/1940s.<sup>19</sup>

The hostility expressed by Palestinians to Jews, i.e. their immediately identifiable oppressors, may well be sometimes expressed in terms that are anti-Semitic. Perhaps the experience of the past 60 years has led to some Palestinians being remiss in forgetting the niceties of political discourse. This is not to excuse this but an attempt to explain it. There is a difference, of course, between the understandable attitudes of some of the oppressed (and the way this is sometimes expressed) and Hamas’s shameful use of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as a reference point.

#### Palestinian suicide bombing

Where is Harris’s concrete proof of Palestinian suicide bombers’ overriding Islamic imperatives? He presents just one case – a failed suicide bomber, quoted from an article in the *New York Times*: “I didn’t want revenge for anything. I just wanted to be a martyr”, adding, “... that his Jewish captors were ‘better than many, many Arabs’” (p.31). I don’t know about you but if I was a Palestinian with direct experience of Israeli “hospitality” and likely to be quoted publicly, for the sake of my future well being I would be inclined to give my recent captors a glowing reference and tell the world (well, the Israeli part of it) what it would like to hear. So, er, that’s it – one piece of “evidence”. Nor, unsurprisingly, does he provide quotes from other Palestinians which would suggest more earthly reasons for their hostility to Israel.

Unlike the victims of suicide bombings and the 9/11 attack, suicide bombers, their families and neighbours are not granted their own human feelings and thoughts, just Harris’s portrayal of their fanaticism (p.11 and p.127). Of course, dehumanising “the enemy” is a classic ploy of imperialisms. It makes it easier to justify any act of barbarism to those that may have some doubts or misgivings about slaughtering other people.

This is not to condone the use of suicide bombing as a “tactic” that kills innocent Israelis, merely to redress the balance of Harris’s one-sided analysis.

Also, in general, even if people do sometimes articulate their actions in religious terms, it doesn’t mean that the sole (or even main) cause of their actions can be defined narrowly as “religious”. In certain circumstances/societies cultural and social factors may mediate language/expressions of thoughts this way. In the real world exploitation and oppression won’t always be experienced, perceived or fought against in some cocoon of completely rational analysis, well-rounded logic or ideological purity.

#### Al-Qaeda

Harris attempts to head off one criticism, raised in an article by R.A. Pape (‘The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism’, *American Political Science Review*, 97, No.3, 2003). In response to this Harris stated: “The fact that terrorist groups have demonstrable, short-term goals does not in the least suggest that they are not primarily motivated by their religious dogmas” (pp.260-1).

Arguing against Pape’s point that “the most important goal that a community can have is the independence of its homeland ... from foreign influence or control”, Harris says that Pape “overlooks the fact that these communities define themselves in *religious* [his italics] terms” and that “Pape’s analysis is particularly inapposite with respect to Al Qaeda” (p.261).

Harris’s assertion doesn’t address Pape’s point when we consider the Palestinians as one of these “communities”. In fact, they fit nicely into Pape’s schema, as they use suicide bombing not as a “religious” act per se but as a tactic (with the “independence” of the “homeland” as the strategic goal).

Following on immediately from the quote above, Harris throws in a red herring – the (correct) refutation of territorial or nationalistic interests motivating Osama bin Laden (as opposed to the Palestinians, who he doesn’t directly refer to). This enables him to think he’s won the argument, triumphantly declaring: “Suicide bombing, in the Muslim world at least, is an explicitly religious phenomenon.... It is no more secular an activity than prayer is” (p.261).

To seamlessly associate suicide bombings by Palestinians and Al-Qaeda is a clever sleight-of-

hand but completely ignores their different political trajectories. Al-Qaeda are reactionary Islamic fundamentalists who originated amongst a section of the Saudi ruling elite (the same elite warmly courted by the US as fervent anti-communists with plenty of oil).

The Palestinians are people who, not unreasonably, would just like back the country from which they were ethnically cleansed in 1948. In Israel/Palestine suicide bombing is a relatively recent development that grew out of the despair and powerlessness felt in the face of increasingly aggressive military incursions by the Israelis towards the end of the last century. Perhaps if the Palestinians had the sophisticated weaponry available to the Israelis, Mr Harris would have had even less cause to make crass generalisations about religious motivations.

Finally, there is one key connection that Harris fails to acknowledge. The fact that Israeli aggression (and US complicity in this) has been a very fertile source of recruitment for Al-Qaeda from Muslims and Arabs angry at the brutal subjugation of the Palestinians (and, of course, the invasion of Iraq).

#### Muslims and suicide bombing

To provide tangible corroborating evidence Harris cites (pp.124-6) a global survey conducted in 2002 by the Pew Research Centre. The survey indicated large percentages of Muslims world-wide who deemed suicide bombings against civilian targets, "to defend Islam", justifiable to a greater or lesser degree. Pretty damning you would think, but this needs putting in context. We don't know what lies behind the raw figures.

They do not necessarily suggest approval of 9/11 although this is evidently Harris's interpretation – he concludes this section with: "We must not overlook the fact that a significant percentage of the world's Muslims believe that the men who brought down the World Trade Center are now seated at the right hand of God ..." (p.127).

Even if this is the case, this still does not mean a direct correlation between his statement and the degree of support for suicide bombing. That would only be true if the motivation for and/or approval of suicide bombing as a wholly "religious" act, which Harris clearly believes and I strongly contest.

Apart from 9/11, the 2002 survey results could also partly or mainly be attributed to a perception by Muslims that "suicide bombing" didn't refer to flying a plane into a building at all but to what the Palestinians did in their conflict with the Israelis.

What also undermines Harris's argument about a rising tide of Islamic extremism is a more recent survey conducted by the same organisation.<sup>20</sup> The subtitle to this report succinctly sum-

marises its content: "Support for Terror Wanes Among Muslim Publics. ISLAMIC EXTREMISM: COMMON CONCERN FOR MUSLIM AND WESTERN PUBLICS." In the relevant section (relating to the survey findings cited by Harris for 2002) the report concludes that "in most majority-Muslim countries surveyed, support for suicide bombings and other acts of violence in defense of Islam has declined significantly". There were substantial reductions in support of suicide bombing in every country surveyed, except for Jordan, the country closest to the Israeli/Palestine conflict. 'Nuf said?

In fairness, of course, the survey report was produced after the early 2005 publication of Harris's book. But my copy (published in 2006) contains no modification of the relevant section. Nor, to my knowledge, has Harris qualified his views based on the more recent survey.

#### 'Secular' religions

In his "war against religion" thesis there are additional hurdles for him to overcome. Suicide bombing as a modern phenomenon began with the avowedly secular and leftist Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.<sup>21</sup> No problem for Harris: "While the motivations of the Tigers are not explicitly religious, they are Hindus who *undoubtedly* [my italics] believe many improbable things about the nature of life and death" (p.239). Plainly, the mere description of Harris as a neuroscientist is insufficient – mind-reader as well, surely? To summarise his main argument, deep down the Tamil Tigers are still Hindus and Hindus are prone to acts of self-immolation! Note, self-immolation – not blowing themselves up – but why let subtle differences like that spoil a flimsy argument?

Apparently, "communism was little more than a political religion.... Even though their beliefs did not reach beyond this world, they [Mao and Stalin's versions] were both cultic and irrational" (p.79). So now religion can also be assigned as a cultic, irrational and rigid ideology – the definitions get broader and broader to disguise the tenuousness of the association. This particular section reminded me of an old history lesson about ancient Peru. Some historian had called it the first socialist society, purely on the grounds that the Incas had instigated a rudimentary form of state planning.

Likewise, Harris claims that "At the heart of every totalitarian enterprise, one sees outlandish dogmas, poorly arranged ...", suggesting an even looser definition of religion. He acknowledges that "Nazism evolved out of a variety of economic and political factors", yet "while the hatred of Jews in Germany expressed itself in a predominantly secular way, it was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity" (p.101).

In a recent interview, Harris repeats the fanciful connections: "And what we find with Nazism

is a kind of political religion. We find this with Stalinism as well – where claims about racial purity [eh?] and the march of history and the dangers of intellectualism, are made in a fanatical and rigid and indefensible way.”<sup>22</sup> Oh dear, oh dear. Back to the meditation, Mr Harris.

Harris also needs to explain why clearly secular China and North Korea fall into his snare. He attempts to circumvent this problem by arguing that these countries are dominated by a dogmatic ideology that *resembles* a religion. He says “... our [i.e. America’s] differences with North Korea ... are a direct consequence of the North Koreans’ having grown utterly deranged by their political ideology, their abject worship of their leaders, and their lack of information about the outside world” (p.242). The more mischievous amongst us might think that these criteria fit another country as well. Note also the clever insertion of “worship”, a word with strong religious connotations.

#### Iraq

Considering its contemporary relevance, Harris seems reticent to address the issue of Iraq, probably because he is on pretty weak ground. He still has a go though, tamely asserting that the only possible reason for widespread Muslim opposition to the invasion (or as Harris would interpret this, support for Saddam Hussein) is because it is “infidels” occupying Baghdad, “no matter what humanitarian purpose it might serve” (p.128) (!). He never considers an alternative possibility, i.e. an expression of support for Iraqis against foreign invaders. Harris is also curiously silent on why millions of non-Muslims world-wide have also expressed their opposition to the war from the moment it was mooted.

Tellingly, he studiously avoids putting the words “Iraq” and “oil” together. In fact, the question of oil is conspicuous by its almost total absence. The term “oil wealth” makes a brief appearance in the index but with no reference to Iraq. Harris also informs us that the American military have “taken ... care ... to minimise civilian casualties” (p.146) (!).

The mounting evidence from Iraq suggests the increasing influence of religious groups in the power vacuum left by the removal of Saddam Hussein. For Harris, though, cause and effect are interpreted through his own warped perspective. To him these developments support his main argument about the pernicious role of fundamentalist Islam. In reality the explosion of extreme religious sentiments has been unleashed as a direct result of the invasion and the cynical attempts by the invaders to play off various factions against each other to retain political control.

The well-worn Western powers’ propaganda about spreading democracy in the Middle East has reached its apogee here. Certain questions require answering, though: “... why were popular

demands for free elections resisted so fiercely by the occupiers for several months after the invasion, and agreed to only after Iraqis took to the streets in their thousands to demonstrate for democracy? Since there is no question the Iraqi public wanted the occupying troops to leave, as poll after poll has shown, and since the entire political class united in calling for a timetable for the withdrawal of occupying troops at two national conferences last year, why do Western political leaders continue to reject talk of any such timetable out of hand?”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the extent of real concern for Middle Eastern democracy can be judged by listing some Middle Eastern countries that the US and UK have long had close ties with: Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. All of these are profoundly anti-democratic regimes whose repression of their own people is helped by plentiful military supplies from Britain and America.

Harris does admit that “... our collusion with Muslim tyrants ... has been despicable.... This situation must be remedied, but we cannot really force Muslim dictators from power and open the polls”, because “were democracy to suddenly come to these countries, it would be little more than a gangplank to theocracy” (p.132). In the light of details cited elsewhere about the extent of American willingness to “interfere” in other countries on any number of pretexts, this is pretty disingenuous. In addition, Harris doesn’t (can’t?) even begin to acknowledge the complexities of life in many countries with a large Muslim population. For example, Iran may have an authoritarian Islamic government but it is in many ways an extremely sophisticated society, a country with a long-standing secular tradition, burgeoning labour movement and a complex and fascinating cultural and social history.

Harris clearly fails to understand that concern for democracy elsewhere is pretty low down on an honest list of US foreign policy objectives. “Muslim tyrants” allow the West access to oil and their own repressive regimes spend vast amounts of money buying Western weaponry, so to hell with democracy. The theocracy argument, of course, provides a convenient excuse for this continued state of affairs.

So the Western powers’ talk about bringing democracy to unwilling, recalcitrant, backward Arabs is breathtaking hypocrisy but plausible propaganda to disguise imperialist ambitions. Likewise, the fiction of Israel as a beacon of democracy in the Middle East, which still has wide currency in the West despite the illegal occupation of Palestinian land and the systematic denial of their human rights (with the continued complicity of the US, UK and other Western countries).

Marxists and religion

For Marxists, the irrationality of religious beliefs

is a given, of course and we are naturally suspicious of any arguments that give undue emphasis to “ideas” as the basis of peoples’ actions. Where are the political, economic and social realities and relationships that determine in various ways the circumstances in which these ideas arise, if (and how) these affect (or don’t) the way people behave in their everyday lives.

The continued existence of religion and the fact that millions of the world’s poor still embrace it in some form or other signifies the failure of socialism (and socialists) to offer and support a viable alternative and address the needs of those millions. We should not condemn or dismiss as gullible those people for falling for religious doctrines. The contemporary local and global contexts in which religious beliefs apparently prosper in various parts of the world requires much deeper assessment and analysis than people like Harris are unable or unwilling to, constrained as they are by ideological viewpoints anathema to socialists.

The depth of real (i.e. revolutionary) working class consciousness is inversely proportional to their embracing of alternative ideological baggage, be it religion, nationalism, racism or other blind-alleys.

Any Muslims’ reactionary views are eagerly highlighted by some people who are certainly no friends of the working class and who themselves are usually unlikely to embrace any “progressive” views. To listen to or read some opinions, a visitor from another galaxy might be forgiven for thinking that violence and discrimination against women and gay people was virtually non-existent amongst white non-Muslims.

#### Muslims and socialism

Without a viable, class-based alternative working-class Muslims will have great difficulty resisting the blandishments of religious orthodoxy.

Reactionaries (both Muslim and non-Muslim) will readily wish to portray all Muslims (regardless of class or country) as part of some global Muslim “community”, united by a common religious belief. Resisting this association will be difficult.

As a result of propaganda, hostility and racism in the “West”, there will be ideological (and further coercive) pressure on Muslims (no doubt played up internally by reactionary Muslim “leaders”). The pressure from other Muslims to conform to some notion of an explicitly Islamic “community” in the face of external threats will make any attempt by individuals or even small isolated groups of Muslims to combat this extremely difficult/heroic.

Supporting and arguing for class politics amongst Muslims is vital. Pandering to reactionary communitarian politics or so-called “community leaders” for some spurious short term unity or (worse) for electoral expediency weakens the socialist cause. Without overt, practical and con-

certed attempts to undermine working class divisions (religious or otherwise), an organisation’s claim to be socialist is a hollow fiction.

#### American power

For people like Harris, Muslims have replaced Soviet-sponsored world communism as the latest global threat to the US. This is merely the most recent variation on a well-worn theme – the US ruling class’s need for a perceived powerful external/foreign threat to the “American way of life”. Accompanying this is a gross exaggeration of “enemy” capabilities/strength and blood-curdling descriptions of their megalomaniac plans. This tendency can be traced through American history all the way back to Salem and witchcraft hysteria. If the actual extent of the threat can’t be “talked up” sufficiently, then future (potential) ones can be with accompanying doom-laden scenarios.

According to US ruling class apologists, American power is now to be deployed to defend the supposedly crumbling walls of liberal democracy against fanatical Muslims hell-bent on world domination. With a mind-boggling inversion of reality, by far the most powerful nation on Earth is cast in the role of beleaguered defender. Compare the vast panoply of military hardware at the disposal of the US with the cheap and crude methods of suicide bombing.

Harris addresses the issue of fundamentalists arising in response to the overwhelming “hegemony” of American power. He can’t quite bring himself to directly refer to the depredations wrought world-wide by US-based international capitalism, so he refers to it obliquely by listing key associated organisations. He argues that “... we are confronted by people who would have put us to sword, had they had the power, long before the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization were even a gleam in the eye of the first rapacious globalizer” (p.265).

But the whole point is they didn’t and don’t have the power! I would have significantly more “romantic” opportunities if I looked like George Clooney. Also, who and where were these “people” before these international capitalist bodies were established? Why have these fundamentalists only relatively recently availed themselves of bombs and other weapons to kill themselves and others with? This technology has been around for decades. If bombs haven’t been handy before, why haven’t they used other means of venting their spleens on the infidel? As Harris never tires of telling us, Muslim extremists have had centuries to use justifications from the Koran, so why wait to the end of the 20th century to “kick off”?

American foreign interventions are usually accompanied by breathtaking double standards and hypocrisy. Harris clearly shares the delusions of some Americans about their country’s activities

abroad. The perpetrators of Fallujah, Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay have nothing to teach the rest of us about human rights or “liberal” values.

#### Conclusion

In recent times other “single issue” books, often with a “progressive” or “radical” veneer have hardly been unusual. Publications about religion, “globalisation”, world-wide poverty or the environment reach a willing audience amongst sections of the middle class in Europe and North America.

Variations on *The End of Faith* theme will no doubt also continue to be churned out in years to come, all with the same basic message and no doubt exhibiting the crude generalisations, dubious analyses, fallacious historical analogies and selective memories such authors clearly have.

A book that began as an acute dissection of the contradictions and irrationality of all main religions ended up as a cleverly re-packaged flag-waving exercise. I can't quite decide whether Harris is confused, naïve, cynical, a bad historian or a combination of all four. I can, though, easily imagine a version of him 40 years ago parading his pseudo-liberal credentials, then concluding that Vietnam was an unpleasant but necessary intervention to save the Vietnamese people from the Red Menace. Napalm, with a note attached: “Sorry, but it's for your own good.”

#### Thanks to my son Jim for his helpful comments and suggestions

#### References

1. Chris Lehmann, ‘Among the Non-Believers’, [www.reason.com/0501/cr.cl.among.shtml](http://www.reason.com/0501/cr.cl.among.shtml)
2. On the question of faith motivating suicide bombers, Harris says: “Our own religious demagogues, the fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, will call a spade a spade and observe that there is a link between Islam and the kind of violence we see in the Muslim world. While I don't agree with these people on anything else, they are actually offering a much more candid and accurate diagnosis of the problem, vis-à-vis Islam, than anything that's coming from the Left” (Blair Golson, ‘Sam Harris: The Truthdig Interview’, 3 April 2006, [www.truthdig.com/interview/20060403\\_sam\\_harris\\_interview](http://www.truthdig.com/interview/20060403_sam_harris_interview)).

This interview suggests that Harris's view of the world has changed little since *The End of Faith*. As an aside, at one point there is a reference to an essay he wrote at the end of 2005 – ‘An Atheist Manifesto’. Harris says “I'm not a big fan of the term atheist. In my Atheist Manifesto, the first thing I argue is that we really don't need the word and probably shouldn't use it”. Mmm. A bit like the story, ‘My Yellow Trousers’, in which I reveal at the beginning that I actually don't have any

yellow trousers.

3. The following summary of the deranged perspective of sections of US society could equally apply to Harris: “America has constructed a vision of an ‘axis of evil’, a hostile, inimical perversion, endemic and hiding not just within a few nations but in communities spread across much of the world. Terror, terrorism and terrorists have become one single, simple, indistinguishable scourge of all humanity, *shorn of political, social, historical or cultural roots and distinctions*” (my italics, to emphasise the key point), Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?* (Icon Books, 2002), p.13.

4. In every continent and in a broad cross section of countries. For a comprehensive list see William Blum, *Rogue State* (Zed Books, 2001), pp.168-178.

5. See George Monbiot, ‘A Well of Hypocrisy’, 16 May 2006 ([www.monbiot.com/archives/2006/05/16/a-well-of-hypocrisy](http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2006/05/16/a-well-of-hypocrisy)).

6. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *American Dream, Global Nightmare* (Icon Books, 2004), p.182.

7. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?*, p.70.

8. For a detailed analysis of the bombing and the context in which it occurred see Institute for Policy Research & Development, *United States Terrorism in the Sudan: The Bombing of Al-Shifa and its Strategic Role in US-Sudan Relations*, at [www.globalresearch.org/view\\_article.php?aid=545338566](http://www.globalresearch.org/view_article.php?aid=545338566)

9. “The political analogy for the Taliban [as Nazis] ... is not only a little too convenient but also totally absurd. For one thing, the Taliban were not racists – indeed, racial equality was a basic tenet of their outlook” (Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?*, pp.24-25).

10. *Ibid.*, p.86.

11. *Ibid.*, p.113.

12. See also the follow up article by Raymond Whitaker, ‘Did American Marines murder 23 Iraqi civilians?’ (*Independent*, 26 March 2006).

13. “According to the UN Committee against Torture ... the US has consistently violated the World Convention against Torture: the Green Berets routinely tortured their prisoners in Vietnam during interrogation, the CIA frequently tortured suspected infiltrators of Soviet émigré organisations in Western Europe, the US trained and maintained SAVAK, the notorious secret service of the Shah of Iran, and trained and equipped the intelligence services of Bolivia, Uruguay, Brazil and Israel with techniques and technologies of torture – to give just a few examples” (Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?*, p.70).

14. Slavoj Žižek, ‘Are we in a war? Do we have an enemy?’, *London Review of Books*, 23 May 2002. Žižek also makes the point that “once we let the genie out of the bottle, torture can be kept within ‘reasonable’ bounds, is the worst liberal illusion, if only

because the [Dershowitz] 'ticking clock' example is deceptive: in the vast majority of cases torture is not done to resolve a 'ticking clock' situation, but for quite different reasons (to punish an enemy or to break him down psychologically, to terrorise a population etc)".

15. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?*, p.113.

16. See Norman Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah* (Verso, 2006), pp.277-278, for a meticulous dissection of Dershowitz's malignant fairy tales.

17. Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies, *Why Do People Hate America?*, p.152.

18. For a more balanced view of contemporary anti-semitism, see Brian Klug, 'The Myth of the New Anti-Semitism', *The Nation*, 2 February 2004 ([www.thenation.com/doc/20040202/klug](http://www.thenation.com/doc/20040202/klug)).

19. See Norman Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah*, pp.277-278, which debunks the myths about this.

20. The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 14 July 2005 (<http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=248>)

21. As a website review of the book points out: "Suicide bombing was in fact the invention of revolutionary communists.... I have never read a communist eschatology [i.e. the motivating end reward], but I doubt if it would include a supply of renewable virgins. This leads me to assume that heaven is not the only trigger for suicide bombing, any more than Moslems are the only people capable of it" (Noel Rooney, 'The critical bias to faith', [www.nthposition.com/thecriticalbiasto.php](http://www.nthposition.com/thecriticalbiasto.php)).

22. Blair Golson, 'Sam Harris: The Truthdig Interview', 3 April 2006, [www.truthdig.com/interview/20060403\\_sam\\_harris\\_interview](http://www.truthdig.com/interview/20060403_sam_harris_interview)

23. 'Are Muslims from Mars and Europeans from Venus?', 17 February 2006, [www.democratsdiary.co.uk](http://www.democratsdiary.co.uk)

# Islamophobia Watch

Islamophobia Watch was initiated in January 2005 as a project to document material in the public domain which advocates a fear and hatred of the Muslim peoples of the world and Islam as a religion. Islamophobia Watch has been founded with a determination not to allow the racist ideology of Western imperialism to gain common currency in its demonisation of Islam.

"... does some stirring work in collecting and aggregating the rancid and putrid rantings of anti-Muslim bigots and racists" – Under Progress weblog

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# What Happened in the Spanish Civil War?

**Jim Creegan**

ON 19 JULY 2006 *Counterpunch* launched an occasional series commemorating the 70th anniversary of the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, fittingly dedicated to the "imperishable gallantry of the Republic's defenders". It began with an overview by Vincente Navarro, who shows how the dominant sectors of the Spanish establishment, including most liberals, continue to view Franco's 1936 insurrection against the Spanish Republic as, at worst, a necessary evil in the fight against Communism, and to this day impose an official silence concerning the massacres that took place during the war and after the Generalissimo's victory three years later ('The Spanish Civil War, 70 Years On: The Deafening Silence on Franco's Genocide').

It is therefore disappointing that Navarro himself only goes part of the way in dispelling the misconceptions that continue to surround the war. He depicts the conflict as a struggle between, on the one hand, the forces of reaction – church, army chiefs and landed oligarchs – and, on the other, a progressive, modernizing government, supported by the majority and pursuing a program of enlightened social reform. While Navarro's description of the Franco camp is accurate, his picture of the Republican side is heavily airbrushed. Missing from his overview, as it was from official Spanish Republican propaganda of the time, are the class struggles that took place behind Republican lines.

Navarro, in fact, specifically takes to task two popular works that tell parts of this story: *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell's 1938 eyewitness account of the war and the fighting between Republican forces in Barcelona, and Ken Loach's 1995 film, *Land and Freedom*, which depicts the resistance of Republican militias to being dissolved into the regular army. In a subsequent contribution to the series, George Galloway also disparages the same two authors ('John Cornford and the Fight for the Spanish Republic', *Counterpunch*, 21 July 2006). Such criticisms are undeserved. Orwell and Loach open a window on a side of Spanish Republican history that has been excised from the official legend, but which is indispensable to understanding

the dynamics of the war, and its outcome.

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The attempted right-wing coup of July 1936 did not, as one might conclude from reading Navarro, interrupt Spain's steady progress towards democratic rights and social equality. The country at that time was by Western European standards an uncommonly poor and class-polarized society. It was dominated with an iron hand by a small group of landowners and capitalists. The main ideological/"spiritual" prop for their rule was a singularly retrograde Catholic Church, despised by the masses. Unlike Britain or France, Spain had never had a democratic revolution. The Catalan and Basque national minorities had long been held in thrall. The majority of the peasantry were not smallholders, but landless agricultural laborers. The development of Spanish industry in the late nineteenth century had also produced an impoverished but militant urban proletariat, centered in the Catalan region. The CNT (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*), a revolutionary anarcho-syndicalist trade-union federation, was the leading organization among both peasants and workers.

When the monarchy was deposed in 1931, a small group of middle class politicians did attempt to graft onto this society a moderate parliamentary regime, but it was clear almost from the start that the circuits of bourgeois democracy were too fragile by far for the voltages of class struggle passing through them. The country seethed with rebellion; huge strikes had taken place, churches had been burned to the ground and haciendas besieged in the years before the Second Republic was proclaimed. The ruling classes feared, not unreasonably, that the slightest relaxation of authoritarian rule would provide an opening for the masses to assert their power and do away with the régime of private property altogether. The right thus conspired from the beginning to put an end to parliamentary rule. Already in 1934, a nationwide general strike was called to pre-empt one such anticipated rightist attempt; this led to armed

clashes between government troops and miners in the northern province of Asturias, leaving at least 1,000 strikers dead. Leading the repression was General Francisco Franco.

When, two years later, the self-same Franco, in response to an electoral victory by the Popular Front, headed a military junta that openly declared war on the Spanish Republic from its Moroccan base, the leaders of the Republican government tried to tell the people that the coup posed no real danger, and held out for a deal with Franco. The Spanish masses, on the other hand, clamored for arms. Having obtained them despite opposition from Republican politicians, they drove back the reactionaries in roughly two thirds of the country. The poor who had defeated the rightist putsch were more radical by several orders of magnitude than the government they rose to defend. As George Orwell wrote:

“... the Spanish working class did not, as we might conceivably do in England, resist Franco in the name of ‘democracy’ and the *status quo*; their resistance was accompanied by – one might almost say it consisted of – a definite revolutionary outbreak. Land was seized by the peasants; many factories and most of transport was seized by the trade unions; churches were wrecked and the priests driven out or killed” (*Homage to Catalonia*, New York, 1952, pp. 48-49).

Most of the resistance to Franco was not at this point carried out by regular government troops, but by union-organized militias and leftist political parties. The largest of these combat forces adhered to the anarchist CNT. But tens of thousands more from the socialist trade union federation, the UGT (*Union General de Trabajadores*) and a newly created party of anti-Stalinist Communists called the POUM (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista*) also took their places at the battlefronts.

The citadel of new-found popular power was the heavily working-class Catalan capital of Barcelona. Following the route of nationalist troops, most of the factory owners fled the city for fear of the union militias, leaving the latter free to occupy the factories and place them under workers’ control. Orwell described scene at the time of his arrival in 1936:

“... The Anarchists were still in virtual control of Catalonia and the revolution was still in full swing ... when one came straight from England the aspect of Barcelona was something startling and overwhelming. It is the first time I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle. Practically every building of any size had been seized by the workers and was draped with red flags or with the red and black flag of the Anarchists; every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and with the initials of the revolutionary parties; almost every church had been gutted and its images burnt. Churches here and there were being systematically demolished by

gangs of workmen. Every shop and café had an inscription saying that it had been collectivized; even the bootblacks had been collectivized and their boxes painted red and black. Waiters and shopwalkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal. Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared. Nobody said ‘*Señor*’ or ‘*Don*’ or even ‘*Usted*’; everyone called everyone else ‘Comrade’ and ‘Thou’ and said ‘*Salud!*’ instead of ‘*Buenos días*’. Tipping was forbidden by law; almost my first experience was receiving a lecture from a hotel manager for trying to tip a lift-boy. There were no private motor cars, they had all been commandeered, and all the trams and taxis and much of the other transport were painted red and black. The revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in clean reds and blues that made the few remaining advertisements look like daubs of mud. Down the Ramblas, the wide central artery of the town where crowds of people streamed constantly to and fro, the loud-speakers were bellowing revolutionary songs all day and far into the night. And it was the aspect of the crowds that was the queerest thing of all. In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist. Except for a small number of women and foreigners there were no ‘well-dressed’ people at all. Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls, or some variant of the militia uniform. All this was queer and moving. There was much in it that I did not understand, in some ways I did not even like it, but I recognized it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for” (*ibid.*, pp.4-5).

(George Galloway notwithstanding, the Orwell of 1936 – the young writer, Independent Labour Party member and POUM militia volunteer who was wounded on the front the following year – was not yet the cold warrior and informer he was to become a decade hence.)

The popular conquest was uneven throughout the country. Most industries in the Basque country remained private hands. But neither were expropriations confined to Catalonia. They took place, widely if less universally, in many other regions of Spain. Workers’ committees often existed side by side with the old-time bosses in both nationalized and private industries. The entire national transportation system was in union hands. Agriculture was partly or wholly collectivized in most regions, even down to medium-sized and small holdings. However, the spontaneous revolution that had taken place on the ground was never ratified on the political level. Hereby hangs the tale that keepers of the official Republican flame would as lief be left untold.

\* \* \* \*

In May of 1937, fighting broke out in Barcelona between government forces on one side, and CNT

and POUM militias on the other. The immediate cause was the resistance of CNT workers to a government attempt to take over town's telephone exchange. The workers understood that by giving up the exchange they would relinquish not only a fortress of their recently established power, which they had shed their blood to wrest from Franco's troops, but also a listening post from which they could eavesdrop on government officials as they laid their larger plans. These plans aimed to reprivatize collectively run farms and factories and to dissolve the party and union militias – in which officers were elected by the ranks and paid the same wages as privates – into a regular national army, with appointed officers and conventional gradations of rank and pay. When firing from the rooftops had ceased after several days of on-and-off skirmishing, and the barricades came down, hundreds of militiamen and women lay dead. The government then proceeded to unleash a reign of terror, in which militiamen were disarmed and sometimes shot on the spot and thousands were arrested and disappeared. Two of the left's most respected leaders – Andrés Nin of the POUM, and the Italian expatriate anarchist Camillo Berneri – were murdered. All this was justified to the Spanish people and the world by claims that the victims of this terror, who had conquered Barcelona for the republic only months before, and whose comrades had died at the front, were part of a fascist fifth column behind republican lines, staging a provocation on orders from Franco. A widely circulated cartoon showed a POUM militiaman removing a hammer-and-sickle mask to reveal a swastika.

The "May Days" of Barcelona were not an isolated incident, only the most visible – and violent – manifestation of a counter-revolution that went on throughout loyalist-held territory. In other places a combination of deceit and political cajolery was used to deprive the masses of the fruits of their victory. Another effective tool was the financial strangulation of worker and peasant collectives by withholding state bank credit. All of these policies pursued a single, unwavering aim: to drain the anti-Franco struggle of all radical social and economic content, and reduce it to nothing more than a fight for electoral democracy, pure and simple, waged by a conventional army employing conventional military methods.

It is easy enough to understand why the middle-class parties in the republican government championed policies which conformed to their interests as persons of property and privilege. But the most zealous promoters of the conservative course were not middle-class moderates, but the Spanish Communist Party (PCE). Vicente Navarro says that the Communist role in the government is often exaggerated. And it is true that, compared to the millions in the CNT, and the tens of thousands in the Socialist unions and even

smaller leftist groups like the POUM, actual PCE membership was tiny. But the PCE had one crucial advantage: it was the official Spanish representative of the Soviet Union, the only country outside Mexico selling arms to the Republic. Control of the Soviet aid spigot permitted the PCE to exercise an influence disproportionate to its numbers, and even to dictate policy to the government and dismiss and appoint its leading personnel. Months after the Barcelona fighting, the PCE, working with Soviet and other foreign Communist operatives in Spain, engineered the downfall of the centrist-socialist government of Largo Caballero, whose mediating services they no longer required after the far left had been defeated. He was replaced by the more compliant Juan Negrín.

Navarro also says that Orwell's account of the Barcelona fighting, in addition to Loach's film, are used by the contemporary Spanish right to justify retrospective support for Franco. This is no doubt true. But such right-wing arguments are usually little more than exercises in demonology, according to which Communists always and everywhere obey some dark urge to stamp out democracy and impose totalitarian rule. The real motives of the PCE were a little less mysterious. With the declaration of the Popular Front in 1935, the Kremlin and its allied parties in the Communist International (Comintern) sought to counter the menace of expansion by Nazi Germany by means of a "collective security" agreement with France and Britain, by which all three governments would combine to halt Hitler's aggression. The French and British governments were cool to Stalin's overtures. It was therefore important to Stalin to convince France and Britain that the fight against Franco, who was backed by Germany and Italy, posed no threat to foreign – particularly British – investments in Spain, to European overseas empires, or to the capitalist order in general. The initiatives of the Spanish masses posed precisely such a threat, which had to be extirpated if Soviet foreign policy aims were to be realized. In the event they weren't realized; France and Britain never lifted a finger to aid the Spanish Republic or to join forces with the USSR in the run-up to World War II.

Any doubts as to Stalin's intentions are put to rest by a personal letter he sent to the Spanish premier, Largo Caballero (before he was deposed). According to Hugh Thomas, the principal English-language historian of the war, the letter was "... full of patronizing advice: the parliamentary method might be more revolutionarily effective in Spain than in Russia.... The letter ended with the advice that peasants' and foreigners' property should be respected ... that the small bourgeoisie should not be attacked, and that Azaña [Spanish president and head of middle-class Republicans] and the republicans should not be cold-shouldered" (*The Spanish Civil War*, 1986, p.533).

Thus right-wing and liberal attempts of the kind Navarro mentions to use the work of those who told the truth about Soviet/PCE policy as proof of the evils of Communism, inevitably run up against a paradox: the Communist Party of Spain was not fighting for communism; anarchists, dissident Communists and left-wing socialists, whom the PCE repressed, were doing a better job of that. The PCE was rather attempting to turn Spain into a stable capitalist democracy, the very thing conservatives claim to stand for.

\* \* \* \*

It is reasonable to ask whether the Soviet-PCE strategy was not in the final analysis the only realistic one conceivable under the circumstances. Was not growing German-Italian power the main danger at the time, to be stopped at all costs, even if this meant putting aside for a time all hopes for a different social order? Was it not common sense to unite the greatest number of people from all social classes around the single common objective of preserving Spanish democracy, and postpone the settlement of social questions until after the war had been won? Class war, however, does not always obey the logic of common sense (and the Spanish Civil War was a class war, when all is said and done). First, the number of small business owners and professionals on the Republican side was a negligible quantity compared to the great mass of poor peasants and proletarians who comprised the bulk of the loyalist armies. The quantitative advantage of keeping these people on side was therefore insignificant. And when a great mass of people is thrown into combat, it is crucial to their morale that they have a good reason to fight. Were they more inclined to give their all for land and factories that belonged to them, or for a pale abstraction like parliamentary government? They themselves answered this question definitively whenever they had the chance.

Second, what of Franco's troops? Most of them were poor peasants and workers as well. Would not the prospect of throwing off their landlords and bosses have undermined their loyalty to their own officers encouraged them to desert? Thirdly, there is the question of Spanish Morocco. The Moorish legions were perhaps the most dreaded and brutal combat force in Franco's armies. Would they have fought so fiercely for their colonial masters if the Spanish Republican government had declared the independence Morocco? We will never know. For fear of offending Spain's potential French allies, who ruled over a contiguous Moroccan colony, and didn't want Spain putting any emancipatory notions into the heads of their colonial slaves, the Spanish government refused to free this subject people. All of the above are cases in which the political weapons of class struggle could perhaps have been every bit as potent as the German Condor Legion that bombed Guernica. The

fact that these weapons were never deployed could serve only to demoralize the rank and file, and was arguably a major factor in the Republic's ultimate defeat in 1939.

As for the wider European situation, the Spanish events took place not only against the backdrop of fascist conquests, but simultaneously with a profound radicalization of French politics. In the same year the Civil War broke out, the Popular Front government of Léon Blum came to power in France in the wake of armed anti-fascist mobilizations by French workers. Blum's election, in turn, triggered the biggest strike wave in the history of France, as a result of which workers won, among other things, the eight hour day and paid vacations for the first time. Would not a revolutionary victory in Spain have given French workers even more confidence? And if, in fact, the latter had taken power, would this not have confronted the fascist states with an obstacle more formidable than the supposed good intentions of Chamberlain and Daladier? It is, again, impossible to say for sure, now or even then. What we can say is that the spontaneous actions of the Spanish masses opened the possibility of an anti-fascist struggle very different from that promoted by Stalin, the Comintern, the Popular Front or the Spanish government.

Twenty years earlier, the Russian people had by their spontaneous actions presented a similar alternative to the carnage of World War I. It was precisely the combination of revolutionary audacity and the political weapons of class struggle that swept the Red Army to victory over the Whites in the Russian Civil War that followed. But the prolonged isolation of the USSR, combined with the desire of those who ruled the Russian state to enjoy unmolested what small privileges they had acquired, caused the Soviet rulers to forget that they once looked to revolution in other countries, rather than diplomatic maneuvers with capitalist powers, to end their encirclement. By 1936, they could see eruptions like the one in Spain only as threats to the international peace they required to build up their own industrial base. Having written off the international revolution, Stalin and his subordinates spared no effort to derail all movements and forces that did not share their pessimism. Thus perished, in the trenches before Madrid, what may have been the last chance of defeating fascism and averting war by replacing the social system that spawned them.

\* \* \* \*

The considerations presented above are hardly new. The vagaries of the Spanish Civil War have been chewed over endlessly – and tediously – by leftists of every stripe and sect in the seven decades that have since elapsed. But we should remember the war – if only as an antidote to the temper of our own profoundly dystopian (Orwellian?) times. We

should pay tribute to the selflessness of all the fighters, regardless of political faction, who gave up home and family, sometimes country and life, for the life of the Republic. It is also helpful to recall that there was a time, not all that remote from our own, when nationalizing an oil well or a natural gas facility was not considered the height of radicalism, and in which preserving a pension plan was not thought of as the greatest possible vic-

tory in the class struggle. It was a time in which ordinary people in one European country, but not only there, were possessed of the wildly unrealistic notion that they could take over and run their country, and, in combination with the workers of other lands, maybe even the world. This was the notion for which hundreds of thousands bled and died. To those bandoliered, plebeian knights errant is the highest honor due. ■

## Revolutionary History Journal

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# REMEMBERING



# 1956

Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it

Revolutionary History Volume 9 no.3

## Remembering 1956

Edition Editor: John McIlroy

When Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin in a private session at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in February 1956, he must have been aware that the general gist of his "Secret Speech" would soon be revealed to the world at large. However, he and his fellow Soviet leaders were clearly not expecting the shock-waves that the speech was to cause within both the Soviet bloc and the official Communist movement.

This issue of *Revolutionary History*, assembled and edited by John McIlroy, is dedicated to responses to Khrushchev's "Secret Speech", and in particular the reactions within the Western Communist Parties. From their leaderships to their rank-and-file members, the realisation that the Soviet leaders were now denouncing Stalin in much the same words as their critics provoked consternation and dismay.

Many Communist party leaders attempted to ride out the stormy year of 1956, trying to act as if nothing that untoward had happened. But Khrushchev's speech and the militant working-class upsurge in Poland and Hungary that threatened the stability of the Soviet bloc inevitably undermined their "business as usual" approach, and they were assailed not only by their left-wing rivals and bourgeois opponents, but by party members who recognised that their movement's glowing image of Stalin had been a cruel deception.

Although the Communist parties survived the crisis year of 1956, the grip that Stalinism exerted over sections of the Western labour movement was greatly weakened. Once the Soviet leaders took the decision to elaborate a critique of Stalin, such a development was inevitable, and in a world dominated by the nuclear balance of terror, this was no longer a major setback for them.

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# The 'Spirit of Petrograd'?

## The 1918 and 1919 Police Strikes

**Owen Jones**

THE REVOLUTION had begun: or so it seemed when the very sentinels of the State revolted in the late summer of 1918. "Spirit of Petrograd! The London police on strike!" cried a jubilant Sylvia Pankhurst, expressing the excitement of other British revolutionaries. "After that, anything may happen. Not the army, but the police force is the power which quells political and industrial uprisings and maintains the established fabric of British society."<sup>1</sup> There could not have been a worse time for this unthinkable strike to happen. The spectre of revolution haunted Europe as never before; the British working class was flexing its muscles; and the Great War still raged in Europe. According to one senior Scotland Yard official, the police were "mutinying in the face of the enemy".<sup>2</sup> Little wonder, then, that the sight of 12,000 furious Metropolitan constables marching on Whitehall sparked panic among ruling circles. According to one Government figure of the time, the supposed defenders of the status quo had surrounded Downing Street with "a very menacing attitude ... [and] made the occupants feel that they were really face to face with a revolution".<sup>3</sup> Would the very heart of the British Empire be stripped of its defences at a time of such crisis?

So began the year-long struggle between the State and its supposed protectors, as the police threatened to defect to an increasingly assertive labour movement. Under the leadership of the National Union of Police and Prison Officers, militantly class-conscious policemen conspired to overturn their role as the subservient body of the State. The Union's president promised that the "the day when the Government can use the police forces as a tool against any other section of the nation is past".<sup>4</sup> Instead, the police would form an alliance with the working class. However, the State had no intention of losing their main domestic organ of power, especially at a time when revolution seemed so firmly on the agenda. Lloyd George, the prime minister of the time, summed up the horror of Britain's ruling class, and their determination to crush police trade unionism forever. "Unless this mutiny of the Guardians of Order is

quelled", he solemnly told the Conservative leader Bonar Law, "the whole fabric of law may disappear. The Prime Minister is prepared to support any steps you make take, however grave, to establish the authority of social order."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the authority of social order was under attack all over Europe. The October Revolution and the horrors of war sent a revolutionary wave hurtling across the continent. Socialist revolution appeared as a distinct possibility not only in defeated countries such as Germany and Hungary, but also in victorious Italy. As labour historian Chris Wrigley wrote: "At the end of the First World War the old ruling classes of Europe felt that they faced the precipice. Winners or losers, the old social systems were threatened with being engulfed by the economic and social forces fermented by war."<sup>6</sup> Britain was not immune to this bubbling discontent. An unprecedented mobilisation of an increasingly assertive working class had occurred during and after the war. Union membership, which numbered 2.6 million in 1910, had more than tripled to nearly 8 million by 1919. The growing organisation of the working class was accompanied by rising militancy. In 1918, around six million working days were lost to strikes, a figure that increased nearly six-fold in 1919. Those taking industrial action between 1917 and 1919 included miners, railway and transport workers, who threatened coordinated action under the banner of the Triple Alliance; as well as engineers, bakers, cotton spinners and munitions workers. Worryingly for the Government, the authority of moderate trade union leaders was undermined as local shop stewards took direct action. As Lloyd George's adviser Tom Jones explained in February 1919: "Much of the present difficulty springs from the mutiny of the rank and file against the old established leaders."<sup>7</sup> Largely this was a consequence of the wartime industrial truce that bound the official trade union leadership, a truce that lost its support among rank-and-file trade unionists.

Discontent did not purely centre on short-term economic demands, but also resulted from dissatisfaction with the very structure of society. A

report presented to the National Industrial Conference by trade unionists in April 1919 stated that: "With increasing vehemence Labour is challenging the whole structure of capitalist industry as it now exists", rather than simply protesting the "more special and small grievances which come to the surface at any particular time".<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, following the sacrifices of millions of British workers, labour expected to reap the rewards: "It must be remembered that throughout the war the workers have been led to expect that the conclusions of hostilities would be followed by a profound revolution in the economic structure of society."<sup>9</sup> In the aftermath of conflict, this disenchantment escalated rather than subsided as the restraints of wartime patriotism lifted. The First Lord of the Admiralty, Walter Long, accurately summed up the mood of the time when told Lloyd George that: "There is no doubt that throughout the country – for aught I now, throughout the world – there is a widespread feeling of unrest which is not by any means confined to one particular class."<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, it is important not to overstate the nature of this unrest. For example, the Labour Party did not withdraw from the wartime Coalition until after the Armistice, and remained reformist in character and five years away from forming a Government. Even so, fear of revolution in the face of widespread industrial militancy and the spectre of Bolshevism was hardly groundless paranoia on the part of the British State. Kingsley Martin, who fought during World War I, believed that: "The only time in my life when revolution in Britain seemed likely was in 1919."<sup>11</sup> Movements such as the Clydeside general strike drew inspiration from Russia, and even "appeared to have some of the features of the soviets set up in Russia in early and mid 1917". Revolutionary sentiment was also prevalent in northern English industrial towns. An independent study of 816 working-class people in Sheffield in 1919 found that only one person denounced talk of revolution. One was even quoted as claiming: "The men want to have a complete revolution in the present system..."<sup>12</sup>

Little wonder that the Government discussed revolution as a distinct possibility. An alarmist Long warned Lloyd George, unless the Government took firm steps, "there will be some sort of a revolution in this country ... before twelve months are past".<sup>13</sup> For members of the propertied classes, the combination of widespread labour unrest and the birth of Bolshevism was a lethal concoction that threatened violent revolution. As one editorial in *The Times* in early 1919 claimed: "The real meaning of the present disorders is that, under cover of an ordinary dispute between employers and employed, an attempt is being made to start the 'class war'", and that striking workers were being used by intellectuals "who desire to emulate Lenin and Trotsky and the 'Spartacus' leaders in Germany."<sup>14</sup>

The labour historian James Cronin is correct

to assert that, despite the troubles, the British "governing elite never lost the capacity or will to rule".<sup>15</sup> However, this was not beyond the realms of possibility throughout much of 1918-19. Faced with progressively bolder attacks on the existing social structure, the State relied on the existence of a loyal police force capable of defending the status quo. As the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Edward Henry, warned a senior government minister as early as 1916: "Troublous times are ahead, and it is particularly important to keep the police happy."<sup>16</sup> Because of its failure to provide an adequate living wage, the Government nearly lost control over the main arm of the state apparatus. Prior to the August 1918 strike, the wages of a policeman were "assessed on the basis of that of an agricultural labourer or an unskilled worker".<sup>17</sup> Although the cost of living during the war had more than doubled, policemen had received an increase in pay of only three shillings since 1914, and a war bonus of 12 shillings. Even after the pay settlement that ended the 1918 strike, a Metropolitan constable with 5 years service who was married with two children received £3 7s, compared with an unskilled labourer who received £3 8s. This disparity triggered widespread resentment. As one City policeman put it during the 1918 strike, "we policemen see young van-boys and slips of girls earning very much more money than we get, and – well, it makes us feel sore".<sup>18</sup>

The impoverished police force was antagonised by the repeated failure of the Government to address the rapid decline of their real wages. Thomas Scott, NUPPO's London organiser, accurately summed up the frustration of many policemen during the strike: "We are sick of being messed about and being told that they are being considered, considered, considered."<sup>19</sup> The Conservative Home Secretary, Sir George Cave, overlooked demands for increased pay from MPs throughout the war. Even a month before the strike, Cave told Parliament that although the question of a pay increase was "under consideration", he did not "expect to be able to announce [his] decision in the matter for some little time".<sup>20</sup> Despite declining real wages, duties expected of the police increased in wartime. Although denouncing the strike as a mutiny, the City of London Police Commissioner Sir William Nott-Bower conceded: "It was hard for many men to keep body and soul together, and as the War proceeded, these hardships became accentuated."<sup>21</sup> Leave was restricted to one day a fortnight, and there were claims that some policemen worked an average of 96 hours for a week's pay.<sup>22</sup> Although 1,200 pensioners were recalled for service and 30,000 volunteer Special Constables were enrolled, these were no replacement for over four thousand of the best policemen who had joined the armed forces.

Faced with poverty and deteriorating labour conditions, the police were inspired by the milit-

ancy of other workers. As *The Times* pointed out, “millions, doing less responsible work, have already received far larger advances than the £1”.<sup>23</sup> Successful industrial action served as an example to the increasingly impoverished police. In the words of NUPPO: “Slowly, economic pressure forced that stereotyped mind into realising that he would have to get a move on somehow; the industrial labourers were reaping big wages while his remained stationary.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the traditional conservatism of the police (described by the Police Union as formerly “a somewhat conservative class”<sup>25</sup>) was overcome as a result of their social and economic decline into the lowest sections of the working class. Telegrams sent by local superintendents as the strike gathered pace throughout the morning of 30 August 1918 demonstrate that insufficient pay was the main catalyst behind police militancy. For example, the superintendent of “M” division informed Scotland Yard that his constables “have refused to go out on duty on the grounds that they are not receiving a living wage”.<sup>26</sup> Reports written by the superintendents two weeks after the unrest concurred with this assessment. One police striker interviewed in “R” division underlined the extent of poverty facing the police, claiming that “it has been very serious for us this last few months going about trying to get food”.<sup>27</sup>

Despite mounting discontent, there was no representative machinery through which the police could voice their demands. Even so, police trade unionism had little success before the force was radicalised by the privations of war. An early attempt to form a police federation attracted the interest of only around a hundred policemen. When Police Orders proscribed the Metropolitan Police Union in 19 December 1913, it enjoyed very limited support.<sup>28</sup> The Union had been formed in 1913 by a dismissed inspector, John Syme, who became a *cause célèbre* in the labour movement for his campaign against tyranny in the police force. However, his long-running campaign for reinstatement – which led to his repeated imprisonment for libel – was of little interest to the rank-and-file. Before his second spell of imprisonment in 1916, the renamed National Union of Police and Prison Officers had only around 200 Metropolitan police members.

Nevertheless, as conditions worsened, the Union attracted the sympathy of growing numbers of policemen. This was partly facilitated by a change of leadership and State repression. Syme was removed as Union secretary in May 1917, and for years would bitterly refer “to that weapon I was treacherously robbed of by Charles Duncan and a few similarly treacherous policemen”.<sup>29</sup> Thereafter, NUPPO was dominated by serving policemen such as James Marston (who became Union president) and Thomas Thiel. Both were committed socialists. As it expanded, NUPPO and

its membership faced relentless persecution from the police authorities. Modifications to Police Orders in November 1916 banned the propagation of any reports “likely to prejudice the recruiting, discipline” of the police, as well as the attendance of any meeting “held with the object of inciting Police Officers to insubordination”.<sup>30</sup> Several were dismissed as a result, including seven policemen in February 1917 for attending a NUPPO meeting. With support growing for NUPPO as the only organisation representing the grievances of the police, persecution of trade unionists only fuelled discontent. Moreover, repression failed to defeat the Union, which spread beyond London to the provinces. For example, by early 1918 a membership of three hundred was reported in the Manchester police force alone.<sup>31</sup>

The Union’s stated purpose, to “improve the conditions of the Services particularly in Pay and Pension” appealed to an increasingly impoverished force. Furthermore, its motto of “Tyranny is not discipline” appealed to those discontented with the arbitrary nature of police authority, particularly returning soldiers who, after being subjected to the horrors of the trenches, were less tolerant of authoritarian discipline. Around 40% of Metropolitan and Liverpool policemen who participated in the 1919 strike for union recognition were former soldiers.<sup>32</sup> The dismissal of Constable “Tommy” Thiel for Union membership on 25 August 1918 was, as NUPPO stated, “the straw that broke the camel’s back”<sup>33</sup> in a force resentful of its impoverishment, lack of representation and its autocratic regime. The list of demands issued to the Government on 27 August 1918, including the increase of the war bonus from 12s. to £1 and its conversion to permanent wages, and a new war bonus of 12.5% (as had been granted to other workers) inevitably appealed to the rank-and-file. Despite this threat, the distance between the rank-and-file and the authorities was highlighted by the fact that two days before most of the Metropolitan Police went on strike, a meeting of superintendents “had reported that all was well with the force”.<sup>34</sup> By 31 August 1918, around 12,000 Metropolitan police constables were on strike.

Rather than settling the dispute, the terms offered by Lloyd George’s Government set the stage for a year-long struggle between police and State. Although the pay demands were largely conceded, and (with the exception of a conscientious objector) all policemen dismissed for Union membership were readmitted, the question of recognition was fudged. Lloyd George himself met the Union delegation the following day, but crucially informed them that he “could not in war time sanction recognition of a Police Union”.<sup>35</sup> Although the Armistice was only two months away, it was widely believed the war could last another year, and the Union believed the authorities meant that recognition would be granted in peacetime. The Pres-

ident of the London Trades Council even informed demonstrating policemen after meeting Lloyd George that: “the Prime Minister gave you recognition.”<sup>36</sup> In a typical illustration of the Union’s position on the issue, its magazine later wrote: “Policemen returned to duty last August under the impression – deliberately given to them – that official recognition of their Union was merely deferred for a time.”<sup>37</sup> The Union was not alone in believing it had been *de facto* recognised, for members of the British elite also saw it as such. A typical example was the Earl of Selborn, who stated: “They tell us that they have not recognised the union, but they have done something that is very difficult to distinguish from recognition...”<sup>38</sup>

Although claiming not to have recognised the Union, the Home Secretary promised that “the men shall be entitled to join any lawful body which they may wish to join, including a Police Union. We do not desire to prevent or hamper them from becoming members of that body”.<sup>39</sup> The absence of persecution allowed the Union to flourish. Prior to the 1918 strike, only a small minority were NUPPO members, but as one superintendent observed, “by active canvassing, picketing, and in some cases intimidation the membership was considerably augmented”.<sup>40</sup> It was claimed that by January 1919, 346 out of Sheffield’s 366 policemen were members, while 90% of the Metropolitan police were members by March. In the May 1919 strike ballot, 48,932 members took part. Although the Government set up Representative Boards as an alternative mechanism to NUPPO, the Union’s Executive was duly elected, leading NUPPO to claim that the “name of ‘Representative Board’ is merely camouflage for ‘The National Union of Police and Prison Officers’”.<sup>41</sup> Boosted by its growing strength, NUPPO was increasingly confident. For example, in January 1919, the Union informed its members that “recognition will follow as surely as the night follows day”.<sup>42</sup> Naively, it repeatedly compared itself to other unions that “fought for years, and won. We shall also win”.<sup>43</sup>

The Government recognised that the success of the Russian Revolution had depended on the defection of the enforcers of the wishes of the State and the consequent inability to maintain its rule. For example, Lloyd George informed the NUPPO delegation on 31 August 1918 that “the trouble in Russia had arisen to a great extent from the existence of the union of committees among the soldiers. He considered the police a semi-military force and that to a great extent the same conditions applied to them, and he would not have a repetition in this country of what had happened in Russia”.<sup>44</sup> The Government had reluctantly negotiated with the Union and conceded many of its demands simply because it lacked other options. Not only was it confronted with escalating labour unrest, but Britain was still at war and the capital had been left defenceless. That the Government even

feared a possible assault was demonstrated by the posting of hundreds of troops to Downing Street and the Foreign Office “to prevent any attack upon the residence of the Prime Minister”.<sup>45</sup>

According to historian T.A. Critchley, the events of August 1918 to August 1919 amounted to “a struggle between organised labour to secure control over the police in a way that would encourage their sympathy in industrial disputes, and the determination of the Government to preserve their neutrality”.<sup>46</sup> Police radicals, however, did not believe that the Government was struggling to “preserve their neutrality”, but rather to preserve their partiality towards State and property. NUPPO militants aimed to sever the connection between police and State in favour of the labour movement, which in of itself had revolutionary implications. Rather than being an “impartial adjudicator”, the Union believed that the police had “always been the tool of the employing classes, to defeat the just and legitimate claims of the worker”, and as a result, “the ordinary worker was forced to the conclusion that the policeman was his natural and avowed enemy”.<sup>47</sup> NUPPO radicals were marked by their class-consciousness. As the Union declared to its members: “we are recruited from the workers; and we shall remain workers, and united with them for the emancipation of the working masses...”<sup>48</sup> Ominously for the ruling class, the Union desired to act on this class-consciousness by refusing to accept the subservience of the police to the State. At the National Industrial Conference in March 1919, the Union President, James Marston, admitted that, “in the past Labour has had the right to look at the policeman with a not too friendly eye, owing to deliberate and persistent official misdirection in the time of Labour troubles”.<sup>49</sup> In front of the Prime Minister himself, Marston declared that no longer would the police be used to repress workers. As Thiel later wrote in a journal with revolutionary inclinations, the ruling class realised “that they were ... losing what has been in the past a tool that had for years been used for strike-breaking”. Moreover, “one of the reasons why the Union was set up was because the men themselves resented being forced to do this blackleg labour”.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, one of the main purposes of the Union was to detach the police from their role as a tool of the capitalist State used to oppress the working class, in favour of alliance with the labour movement. There were good reasons for such a revolutionary position to gain widespread support among a body like the police. Because the State had ignored the deteriorating conditions of policemen and attempted to repress their sole representative organisation, they had little option but to seek the support of organised labour. As the Union put it: “Who drove the Services into the arms of Labour? Nothing but the callous indifference to all appeals, both in and out of the House

of Commons....”<sup>51</sup> As a result, NUPPO affiliated to numerous trades councils, as well as the Trade Union Congress and the Labour Party. One appeal to trade unions declared that, “the Government, aided by the Capitalistic Press, has made a series of blows at the Trade Union movement of this country, the latest of which is an effort to smash” NUPPO. This explicitly placed the Police Union in the industrial fraternity, and attempted to manipulate fears of other trade unions that without swift action, the Government would also repress them. Furthermore, the appeal recognised that because the Union “declined to be alienated from the workers”, the State desired its destruction. Crucially, it also added that “unless the whole of Organised Labour act at once *energetically*” to gain recognition of NUPPO, “the opportunity of cementing the bonds of friendship which of late years have grown between the services and the workers will be irretrievably lost”.<sup>52</sup> In other words, support was sought from the labour movement with the promise that, if the Union was saved, a police service would exist that was sympathetic towards the working class. If the Union were to be purged, then the police would revert to their traditional status as an enemy of the labour movement, or “a weapon wielded by the capitalist class in order to thwart the legitimate aims and demands of the workers”.<sup>53</sup>

The State risked losing control of the police force to the labour movement at a time when working-class militancy was more threatening to the capitalist *status quo* than ever before. Between the first and second strikes, the Government was unable to rely on the police to repress labour unrest. Scotland Yard’s head of intelligence, Basil Thomson admitted in December 1918 that, “it would not take very much in the midst of serious labour disturbances, carried on with the sympathy of the Police, to do enormous damage to the credit of the country”.<sup>54</sup> In March 1919, General Macready – the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police force – informed the Home Office that “in case of labour trouble ... I could not depend on the force”. According to Macready, “the influence of the hostile Representative Board” – effectively the Union executive – “was still powerful enough to paralyse police action in the event of the force being called upon to quell labour riots”. In other words, the Union (which Macready described as a “Soviet”) had partially succeeded in stripping the police of its role as the chief arm of the state apparatus. As Macready added: “If the country had been free of labour unrest the question of the police would not have been so difficult to solve....”<sup>55</sup> In the midst of unprecedented working-class unrest, the existence of a loyal police force was crucial. The State could not even rely on the part-time Special Constables as substitutes. During the strike, “Special Constables with trade union sympathies were frankly on the side of the strikers”,<sup>56</sup> a claim

endorsed by numerous subsequent police reports which reported that, “had the strike continued, no doubt they all would have refused duty”.<sup>57</sup>

The notion that police trade unionism was part of an attempt at a revolutionary seizure of power was common throughout the British elite. In a typical example, one *Evening Standard* editorial denounced the Union as “a sort of police Soviet” that was “like a Soviet system in the army ... the shortest cut to general disorganisation”.<sup>58</sup> The rise of Soviets in the Russian Imperial Army was fresh in the mind of the British elite who feared that NUPPO represented a very similar phenomenon, opening the way for the disarmament and subversion of the state apparatus. As *The Times* put it: “The police are the greatest obstacle to the promoters of disorder.... To get control of the police became necessary for their plans, and they have come pretty near success. They may succeed yet....”<sup>59</sup> Establishment figures such as Lord Whittenden could not believe that the police “would have taken the extreme step that they took” unless they had been driven on by “the enemy in the midst and Bolshevism”.<sup>60</sup>

Although socialists such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Harry Pollitt were enthusiastic about the police struggle, others believed that the State would simply resort to using the army instead. *The Socialist Standard*, the organ of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, argued in August 1919 that even if the police gained recognition, “the simple and inevitable result must have been the increased use of bayonets instead of batons in industrial disputes. The masters have more strings than one to their bow”.<sup>61</sup> However, the military was also increasingly affected by unrest. According to Kingsley Martin, soldiers “began to talk ominously, in whispers, about looking forward to shooting their officers when they go home”, and claimed that only the arrival of American reinforcements prevented British mutinies during wartime.<sup>62</sup> After the cessation of hostilities, the British army mutinied at Calais and Boulogne, demanding swift demobilisation. Furthermore, the British elite feared growing radical consciousness in the ranks of the Army. During the Clyde strike in January 1919, General Childs warned the Cabinet that in the past, “we had a well-disciplined and ignorant army, whereas now we had an army educated and ill-disciplined”.<sup>63</sup>

With Army unrest growing, the ruling class were concerned that a victory for police militants would encourage soldiers to follow suit. During the 1918 strike, soldiers sent to protect Government buildings fraternised with the thousands of striking policemen who had invaded Whitehall. For example, according to one newspaper account: “Strikers held the soldiers’ rifles as they dismounted, and there were hearty cheers.”<sup>64</sup> Lloyd George was even informed that the Grenadier Guards were openly declaring that they would refuse to obey

orders to disperse the striking policemen. Following the strike, one British Admiral predicted that the success of the Police Union would encourage a revolt of the Navy: "After the police, the next strike will be the Navy! I know the British sailor to his very core! ... the authorities will now have a mutiny as sure as fate!"<sup>65</sup> This fear was also prevalent at the highest echelons of the Government. Long informed the Prime Minister in late May 1919 that sailors were "watching the action of the London police very closely, and that any mistake made here would have very serious consequences among them.... This kind of thing is very infectious; I am sure I need not indicate to you how grave it would be if anything of the kind became really active in the Navy".<sup>66</sup>

This unrest was alleged to be "previously altogether unknown".<sup>67</sup> The situation was so grave, Long believed, because if NUPPO were to gain recognition then sailors would demand their own Union. As the Russian and German Revolutions had demonstrated, the overthrow of the State was made possible by the defection of those responsible for enforcing its wishes and suppressing its enemies – particularly the Army. Thus, Long and his colleagues believed that the elimination of NUPPO was not only necessary to maintain control over the police, but potentially the loyalty of the armed forces.

Faced with a crisis of revolutionary implications, the authorities were always committed to the destruction of NUPPO. As Macready informed the Prime Minister in January 1919: "As regards official recognition, I can only say that, in my opinion, not only is it impossible but I believe to be quite impossible for the Union to exist ... if the country is to have an efficient body of Police on whom the Authorities can absolutely rely."<sup>68</sup> Regaining control over the police was far from simple. The Union was powerful, with around two hundred branches by January 1919. Although hostile to the Union, *The Times* was forced to admit in April 1919 that NUPPO's leadership, "no matter how much they have blundered, possess the confidence of their members, the numbers of which are increasing".<sup>69</sup> However, through a combination of repression, economic concessions, internal police divisions, and the absence of assistance from the labour movement, police trade unionism was permanently routed following the failed strike of July 1919.

General Macready had been appointed as Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police after the strike forced the resignation of his predecessor. Macready – who had previously been charged with repressing labour unrest in South Wales – recognised that police would think that he "had been selected in order to dragoon them into submission".<sup>70</sup> Between October and February 1919, a battle was waged between the "police Jacobins" of the Union (through the Representative Board's executive

committee) and the Commissioner for control of the police force. The Board passed resolutions that the General believed were beyond the remit of a force subservient to authority. For example, one resolution stated that "a further depletion of the Police Force would probably have an injurious effect upon law and order in the Metropolitan Police District", to which Macready responded: "The responsibility for law and order rests upon the Commissioner and this Resolution is not one that comes within the functions of the Board."<sup>71</sup> Indeed, an important component of this struggle was over the very nature of the police force. Macready was adamant that the police force should be ruled by top-down military discipline, but the Union believed in bottom-up democracy. Newly elected Secretary Jack Hayes summed up the position of the Union on the form it desired the police to take when he called for the "democratisation of the police force, the ending of militarism in the Metropolitan Force, the full and complete recognition of the union, and the closely linking up of the police with organised labour".<sup>72</sup> Calls for the ending of militarism were frequent, as was a demand for "a revolution of ancient and despotic methods in the Services".<sup>73</sup>

Faced with an intransigent Board controlled by a Union with a radically different conception of police discipline, Macready did not have long to wait for an excuse to move against his rivals. On 24 February 1919, after the Board's executive committee refused to accept one of his orders, Macready refused to deal with it any further, and drew up plans for the election of three different Boards representing constables, sergeants and inspectors separately.<sup>74</sup> However, NUPPO remained deeply entrenched in the police force. Due to a Union boycott, only around 50 per cent of the required representatives submitted themselves for election. As even *The Times* reported: "It is asserted in official statements that the Union has captured the machinery of the Representative Board, but it is clear in the minds of the members of the Police Force that the Union created the Representative Board and it is the authorities who are trying, indeed very hard, to gain possession of this form of representation."<sup>75</sup> In other words, the Union had won the right of representation for the previously voiceless police, and now the authorities were attempting to restore their domination. Following the dismissal of the Union-dominated Board, the policy of repression accelerated. On 17 March 1919, Macready informed the police that the War Cabinet had decided against recognition, and threatened to dismiss those who remained members. Constable Spackman was dismissed for advocating the election boycott, and when the Union threatened to take strike action, Macready stated that any policeman who did "will be forthwith dismissed from the Force".<sup>76</sup> The Government backed the Commissioner, with the Home Secretary

claiming on 28 May 1919 that “At present there is no policemen’s union”,<sup>77</sup> and insisting that if policemen retained Union membership, “they will then cease to be policemen”.<sup>78</sup> The natural climax of this mounting repression was the legal suppression of the Police Union; and on 8 July, the Government began to introduce a Police Bill that banned policemen from becoming “a member of any trade union”.<sup>79</sup> The prospect of losing secure employment terrified thousands of policemen, particularly those who risked a pension that they had only gained after years of toil. Anticipating the impending failure of the strike movement, one contemporary leftwing journal aptly described the gravity of unemployment for a policeman: “Bobby is a man with no other trade in his hands in the vast majority of cases. So the threat of losing a regular job has special terrors for him.”<sup>80</sup>

Alongside repression, the Government offered generous economic concessions in order to regain control over the police forces. Following the recommendations of Lord Desborough’s inquiry into the pay and conditions of the police force, the Government announced considerable pay increases on 30 May 1919. A constable’s starting pay, for example, which had been £1 10s before the war and was £2 3s after the strike, was increased to a range of £3 10s to £4 10s.<sup>81</sup> As one policeman told a newspaper during the failed strike of 1919: “We have had a great deal to complain about in the past, and I believe that the last strike helped us very much, but today we are being treated better than at any time since I joined the force. Our position is quite comfortable now...”<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, representative machinery was to be established in the form of the Police Federation. Amounting to a sort of company union that was much more limited in scope than NUPPO, it was to be divided by rank and forbidden from discussing “questions of discipline and promotion affecting individuals...”<sup>83</sup> This certainly did not satisfy large numbers of policemen. Although the police forces of Sheffield, Manchester and Bristol declined to strike, they condemned the proposed Federation in August 1919.<sup>84</sup> Now that their conditions had been dramatically improved, policemen were “not prepared to endanger their positions and pension rights to secure recognition”, as *The Times* put it during the 1919 strike.<sup>85</sup>

Divisions among the police – principally between conservatives, moderates and radicals – also contributed to the Union’s defeat. This partly reflected divisions between lower and higher ranks. Admittedly, one Union account is overly simplistic in claiming that: “The lower ranks are unanimous, whilst those in higher positions are simply sitting on the fence...”<sup>86</sup> However, the lower ranks were *more likely* to be attracted to the Union. The vast majority of those on strike in 1918 were Constables, and those Sergeants who took action, according to one superintendent report, were often “re-

garded by their officers as inclined to be unduly familiar with Constables and lax as disciplinarians”. Another report pointed out that: “The attitude of the whole of the Inspectors was complete opposition to a strike and the notion of a Union on Trade Union lines.” This is an accurate representation of the “conservative”, anti-Union faction of the police, which was largely confined to the higher ranks. The “moderate” faction supported the existence of a Union, but opposed affiliation to the labour movement and often opposed strike action. Once more, such a position largely drew its strength from higher ranks. According to evidence given by one Inspector from Leeds to Desborough’s inquiry: “There is, however, a fairly strong body of opinion in the Service averse from the affiliation of the Police Union with any outside organisation ... a great many do not join the Union for that reason.”<sup>87</sup> Although a Sergeant endorsed this claim, a Constable from Leeds claimed: “the men find that they cannot trust themselves to the authorities entirely and it is necessary they should remain affiliated to labour in order to protect their interests.”<sup>88</sup>

During the abortive strike of 1919, it was moderates and conservatives who generally abstained. Conservatives had long made their position clear; a group of City policemen in May 1919 denounced moves towards a strike, which they claimed served “no other purpose than a political move to cause a revolution in this country”.<sup>90</sup> Many moderates opposed the Police Bill, but not to the extent of endorsing strike action to prevent it becoming law. For example, Bristol Police Union passed a resolution stating that: “although there are clauses in the Police Bill which do not meet with our approval, we are of the opinion that they are not of sufficient gravity to warrant us to withdraw our services, thereby assisting to plunge the country into the danger of a revolution.” A similar resolution was passed by Manchester, whose secretary added that: “If, in the first place, the authorities had met the officials of the union this trouble would never have occurred.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, thousands of policemen remained opposed to the Government’s policy, but refrained from strike action because of the threat of dismissal, economic concessions and, occasionally, opposition to the Union’s alliance with the labour movement.

Blunders on the part of the Union leadership also contributed to its destruction. A strike ballot over recognition, improvements in pay, and the reinstatement of Constable Spackman resulted in a vote of 44,599 in favour of strike action, and only 4,324 against. However, at a demonstration at Hyde Park on 1 June 1919, Secretary Hayes declared that the Union would suspend strike action, claiming that Macready expected action and had “brought their Guards Regiment to London and got them ready to put in the police stations, if we strike”.<sup>92</sup> This demonstrated weakness, and sub-

sequent economic concessions and successful repression ensured that the mood moved swiftly against a strike. Macready believed that the postponement of industrial action was instrumental in allowing him to emerge victorious, stating: "they committed a tactical error in postponing it for eight months, when the loyalty of the force enabled me to cope with it without recourse to the military."<sup>93</sup> The authorities had long prepared for a showdown for the Union. Macready had held a conference with other Chief Constables in December 1918 on possible measures to be taken, while the Commissioner of the City Police prepared to use the military to nullify a strike's social effects. The Union was no match for the combined resources of the British Empire.

Recognising its weakness in a confrontation with the State, the Union had relied on the labour movement to come to its rescue. The Police Union received enthusiastic support from the rank-and-file of the labour movement. Prior to the strike, delegates at the National Union of Railwaymen passed a resolution urging "all workers to render all possible support to the police in their effort to secure justice", while the Labour Party Conference of 1919 denounced "the policy of repression adopted by the Government" and called for "full and frank recognition of this Union".<sup>94</sup> Buoyed by promises of sympathetic action by other unions, NUPPO believed that it had "unlimited influence on our side".<sup>95</sup> However, the leadership of the labour movement was less radical. For example, during the 1919 Liverpool police strike, the local Labour Party was active in "taking all steps possible to bring out all the trades", and called on the Party Executive Committee "to exert the full power of Labour on the side of the Police".<sup>96</sup> Such support was not forthcoming, for the national Labour leadership opposed action and had advised NUPPO "not to proceed with the threat to strike, because it was felt here that the Government was too strong" for the Union.<sup>97</sup> A meeting of trade unionists in Liverpool also declared "common cause" with the police and called for workers "to cease work at once, owing to the attack made by the Government against Trade Unionism".<sup>98</sup> Once more, the opposition of the national leadership ensured that no sympathetic action took place. The sole example of sympathetic action was in London, where five hundred railway workers at Nine Elms struck in support of the police. The general secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen described the action as a "grave mistake", and without support from the leadership, the strike soon fizzled out. The leader of the Miners' Federation would also later clarify that the Triple Alliance leadership opposed strike action by the police and had been unwilling to offer help.<sup>99</sup>

The conservatism of the labour movement's leadership was not the only factor preventing the rescue of police trade unionism by organised lab-

our, however. Many workers had long resented the police for their role as strike-breakers and subsequently lacked an appetite for taking sympathetic strike action. For example, future Communist leader Harry Pollitt described an attempt to gain workers' support for the police strike as "one of the hardest jobs I ever undertook", as London dockers asked: "how can you stick up for the coppers? They batoned us down in the Dock Strike in 1912."<sup>100</sup> Similar feelings existed in Liverpool, where memories of police brutality against a demonstration in support of striking transport workers on so-called "Bloody Sunday" in 1911 were still raw.

The failure of organised labour to take sympathetic action sealed the fate of police trade unionism. As a result, some police abstained from strike action. As one police report admitted on 4 August 1919, "there are a considerable number of waverers, sitting on the fence waiting to see what action Organised Labour will take".<sup>101</sup> Secondly, it ensured that the combined power of labour was not used to save the Police Union. Even a month after the strike, the Union optimistically believed that: "Organised Labour in Great Britain pledged itself to support the Union, and unless that pledge is broken, the Union cannot go down."<sup>102</sup> Only by late October 1919 was the Union accepting that there were "considerable doubts as to whether Organised Labour will rally to the effectual assistance of our comrades on strike".<sup>103</sup> With the Union abandoned by labour, the full power of the British State could successfully extinguish police trade unionism forever.

The combination of economic concessions, repression, Government outmanoeuvring, Union blunders, police divisions and the failure of organised labour to support the police ensured the failure of the 1919 strike. Industrial action represented a last-ditch effort to save the Union as the Police Bill – which proscribed trade unionism in the police force – was read by Parliament. Only 1,081 Metropolitan policemen went on strike out of force of over 20,000, and even some members of the Executive failed to strike. By the second day, the Metropolitan authorities were sufficiently confident to declare the strike "as having been a complete failure".<sup>104</sup> Although 118 Birmingham policemen also joined the strike, only in Merseyside was the strike a success. According to Macready, this was because of "the presence of many Irishmen in the force, a class of men who are always apt to be carried away by any wave of enthusiasm".<sup>105</sup> In reality, the fact that Liverpool policemen were still paid less than ordinary labourers, the fact the Chairman of the Watch Committee "was dictatorial and hated by the force", and that the Head Constable was similarly unpopular encouraged observance of the strike.<sup>106</sup> Half the Liverpool police force took industrial action, triggering widespread looting on the part of hundreds of the impover-

ished slum-dwellers. One newspaper claimed: "central Liverpool ... represents a war zone",<sup>107</sup> while another account described it as "rather reminiscent of early occupation days in some of the Cologne districts".<sup>108</sup> Liverpool was put under effective military occupation as tanks patrolled the streets and three thousand soldiers seized key public buildings and brutally restored order. Many were injured by baton-charges, and one looter was shot dead. Demonstrating the extent of Government fears, a battleship and two destroyers were sent to Liverpool. Public declarations by trade unionists that looting simply played into the hands of the State fell on deaf ears, underlining the lack of influence wielded by organised labour over the city's lumpen elements. As in London, all striking policemen were dismissed and replaced within days. As local branches throughout the country dissolved themselves within days of the strike, and the Police Bill was passed by Parliament despite the half-hearted opposition of the Labour Party, it was evident that the Union was utterly defeated.

One key result of the strike was the dismissal of the most radical faction of the police force. Little wonder that a key figure in the shop stewards' movement of the time, J.T. Murphy, believed that the "strike was provoked by the Government for the purpose of ridding the police force of radical elements".<sup>109</sup> There is ample evidence that the State intended to purge such elements to ensure the future loyalty of the police. On the second day of the strike, Macready believed that the reputation of the Metropolitan Police would only increase now it had been "purged of these discontented elements",<sup>110</sup> while in a future report he claimed that "the result of this strike was an undisguised blessing to the Force, as the extreme element disappeared, and from that moment the Force has steadily improved in efficiency and discipline".<sup>111</sup> The City Police Commissioner also welcomed the dismissal of "the whole of the dangerous agitators",<sup>112</sup> while bourgeois newspapers such as *The Times* concurred that the movement represented "a purging of the Metropolitan Force of a troublesome element of discontent rather than a strike".<sup>113</sup> By providing generous economic concessions prior to proscribing the Union, the authorities were aware that only the most militant policemen would take industrial action. Their dismissal represented the elimination of the radical leadership of the police.

Because the constitution of the Police Federation stated that it would be "entirely independent of and unassociated with anybody or person outside the police force",<sup>114</sup> links between the police and the labour movement were forever shattered. As historian Stuart Bowers wrote: "Their segregation from the trade unions was not enforced without difficulty, but it was achieved completely."<sup>115</sup> Further separating the police from the working class was its dramatic improvement in pay and

conditions, which were now standardised across the country. Rather than pay being "assessed on the basis of that of an agricultural labourer or an unskilled labourer"<sup>116</sup> as was previously the case, the police joined the aristocracy of labour. By 1924, constables on maximum pay would receive 55-60 per cent more than the earnings of the average male worker in industry.<sup>117</sup> As a result of the newly privileged economic and social condition of the police, the purge of the radicals, and its separation from the labour movement, the modern police was created as a force entirely subservient to the British State and separate from the working class.

Britain's rulers were optimistic that the defeat of police militancy would prove a setback for an increasingly militant labour movement generally. The Lord Mayor of Liverpool described how Lloyd George "looked on the Liverpool police strike as perhaps the turning-point in the Labour movement, deflecting it from Bolshevist and Direct Actionist courses to legitimate Trade Unionism once again. Had Liverpool been wrongly handled, and had the strikers scored a success, the whole country might have very soon been on fire".<sup>118</sup> The British elite generally shared Lloyd George's optimism. For example, *The Times*, in an August 1919 editorial entitled "A Turning Point", claimed that now strikes had begun to fail, "a change has set in".<sup>119</sup> However, labour militancy continued with a similar intensity over the next two years. Although eight million days less were lost to industrial action in 1920 than 1919, over twice as many were lost in 1921 as 1919. Even so, during the industrial action of 1919-1921, and especially during the General Strike of 1926, the British State could rely on a loyal police force in its dealings with the labour movement. The State has maintained this achievement to this very day.

The hundreds of policemen who went on strike in 1919 paid a heavy price. The State stayed true to its word and ensured their permanent dismissal from the police force, without any pension rights. Some had been only weeks away from claiming their pension. Poverty awaited them. By 1924, out of 2,400 strikers, only 200 had found employment suitable to their qualifications. Hope was kept alive only by the solidarity of the labour movement, and the promise of repeated Labour Conferences to immediately reinstate the strikers as soon as a Labour Government was elected. This hope was cruelly disappointed upon the election of Ramsay MacDonald's minority Government of 1924, which betrayed these promises. Although the former Secretary of the Union, Jack Hayes, was elected as a Labour MP and continued to lobby on behalf of the policemen within Parliament, the strikers had lost their battle. However, they remained self-described "stalwarts of the socialist movement", united by the memories of a struggle that had sparked panic among the rulers of the British Empire. On 30 June 1953, the Association of Lon-

don Police Strikers issued its last report: "Although perhaps we do not wish to record the fact, it still remains that it is 34 years since we first took the plunge for freedom and the right to organise and we have grown old. We must not forget to bear that truth in mind and dedicate ourselves to the help of others in need through age and infirmity, so that when the last shall come we shall be gratified in the thought that we stood by each other to the end."

## Notes

1. *Workers' Dreadnought*, 7 September 1918.
2. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 August 1918.
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# REVIEWS

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## Introducing Marx's *Capital*

Francis Wheen, *Marx's Das Kapital*, Atlantic Books 2006. Hardback, 130pp, £9.99.

### Reviewed by Mike Rooke

WRITTEN IN the clear and succinct style of his 1999 biography of Karl Marx, this book offers an account (a "biography") of the genesis and fortunes of Marx's *Das Kapital*. Issued as part of a "Books that shook the world" series that includes the likes of Plato, Darwin, Paine, and the Bible, the aim was clearly to offer a short guide that would provide an introduction for students and the general reader. The book consists of three parts covering the genesis, content and afterlife of Marx's magnum opus. In contrast to the many commentaries that present it as a work of Economics (or Political Economy), Wheen sets out to present *Capital* as a work that extends "beyond conventional prose into radical literary collage" incorporating as it does allusions and references to the "great" works of literature – Classical Greek, Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, etc. In other words it can be understood as a "gothic" work of art depicting capital as a devouring monster of human labour (the phrase "capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour" adorns the back cover of the book). Wheen makes a convincing case in support of this thesis.

In tracing the gestation of *Das Kapital*, the first volume of which was published in 1867, with the second and third volumes appearing only after Marx's death in 1883, Wheen begins with Marx's 1844 Paris Manuscripts, where (under the influence of Engels' 'Critique of Political Economy') he engages critically with Political Economy for the first time, and the category of alienated labour is elaborated. The *Paris Manuscripts*, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), the *Theories of Surplus Value* (mid-1860s) and the *Grundrisse* (1857-58), were so many staging posts in the developing work whose intended final product was *Das Kapital*. It was thus a lifelong work in progress, and of course, as Wheen describes, incomplete at the time of Marx's death.

The analysis of the commodity in the opening chapters of Volume 1 of *Das Kapital*, where the categories of use value and exchange value, useful and abstract labour, the labour theory of value, surplus value and commodity fetishism are introduced, is given the standard treatment, but in Wheen's admirably clear and economical prose style. Along the way he disposes of several object-

ions traditionally levelled against Marx – that his immiseration thesis is disproven by the rising standard of living of the working class of the "developed" countries, and that the majority of workers are no longer exploited. Wheen makes it clear that Marx's point was always that the more productive labour became, the greater the domination of capital (as accumulated value) over it. The exploitation of labour and the imperatives it gives rise to – the pressure to work long hours and the intensification of the work effort – remain the driving forces behind capitalist industry and a source of alienation for its workers. But while Wheen takes the view that *Das Kapital* remains relevant because "its subject still governs our lives" (the baleful domination of humanity by the imperative of production for the sake of production), he implicitly rejects Marx's view that the capitalist mode of production contains within it its own negation, the conviction that living labour can become a revolutionary force. There is no appreciation of any logic pointing beyond the continuing domination of capital. Such an appreciation would have required a grasp of the centrality of the dialectic to *Das Kapital*. But Wheen's view of Marx's dialectic is that it was a useful literary device (borrowed from Hegel) that he employed to prevent his predictions being dis-proven by the actual outcome of events. In other words, for Marx "dialectic means never having to admit that one was wrong". This is a hopelessly inadequate position to take, even if it appears to be supported by a cursory remark made by Marx to Engels in their personal correspondence.

While Wheen treats the labour theory of value, abstract labour and alienation as important and central to *Capital*, he does not (along with most other commentators) appreciate their unity. The unity of alienated labour = abstract labour = value can only be understood as a dialectic of social antagonism that drives forms of value (commodity, money) to assert their autonomy from labour (the source of value). This dialectic thus has a diachronic aspect (it develops over time) and proceeds through the struggle of class against class. In failing to grasp this dialectic orthodox Marxism never understood the transformation that was required for the abolition of wage labour. For it is only with the full development of wage labour that the prerequisites for its supersession emerge: the colonisation of all life by value, both spatially in the world market and in the homogenisation of capitalist work. Only as a dialectic does the development of the wage labour-capital relation become intelligible as communist critique. The subjectivity denied living

labour appears as its opposite in the objectivity of value (fetishism), but this objectivity is in turn the (contradictory) foundation for the (reconstitution) of subjectivity at a higher level – the conscious direction of social labour by the associated producers. Without the dialectic understood in this way, the society of capital indeed appears as the end of history, without a subject that can subvert its dominance. Notwithstanding his sympathy for Marx, Wheen's position is one of a resigned fatalism in the face of capital.

But why, asks Wheen, did Marx not encapsulate his "economic" concepts in a short book the size of *Value, Price and Profit* (1865), rather than the thousands of pages of *Das Kapital*? He quotes Ludovico Silva to the effect that "the delusive nature of things" necessitated a critique of traditional categories and the creation of entirely new ones: "In short, *Das Kapital* is entirely sui generis." This invokes Marx's comment that if the appearance of things coincided unproblematically with their essence there would be no need for science. But this only returns us to the relation of the dialectic and Marx's critique. *Das Kapital* is a massive and at times tortuous working through of categories that express the contradictory workings of the real – the unity of opposites constituted by the value form of social labour. It was necessarily difficult, not because Marx had a penchant for metaphysical acrobatics, but because the object was the inverted, "topsy-turvy" world of the commodity form, whose mode of appearance is necessarily fetishistic.

In covering the "afterlife" of *Das Kapital*, Wheen offers the reader a sprinkling of interesting observations about the reception of the first volume. Only in Russia was there any enthusiastic response, and no English edition appeared in Marx's lifetime. The publication of the second and third volumes was the result of editing work by Engels. But the real point is that the dialectic of labour that animates and structures *Das Kapital* was not absorbed by the first generation of Marxists after Marx. In this way Hyndman, in keeping with most post-Marx Marxists, could celebrate the book (and as Wheen informs us, plagiarise it), but fail to grasp its dialectic. Admittedly readers then did not have the benefit of access to Marx's 1844 *Paris Manuscripts*, and so might justifiably have had difficulty in detecting the alienation of labour that runs below the surface of the entire analysis of *Das Kapital*. This failure however had the consequence of leaving that generation of Marxists with a limited conception of the self-transformation of labour required for its abolition. Marx bears some responsibility too – in seeking to present a work whose "scientific" credentials would disarm the bourgeois critics, he left the dialectic of labour more "hidden" than was necessary.

In the concluding part of the book Wheen takes a justifiable swipe at the plundering of Marx by the contemporary cultural studies brigade, and points

out that much of what passes as radical critique and research in the academy is in fact recycled Marx. The message is – best to refer to the original. For readers exploring Marx for the first time, this book will provide a useful antidote to the overly scholastic exegeses produced by the academic Marx industry. It also comes with a degree of Wheen humour that makes for an entertaining as well as informative read. But it must be treated with caution, lacking as it does any appreciation of the dialectic that is key to Marx's view of revolution. If it whets your appetite, persevere with the opening chapters of *Das Kapital* itself. There is ultimately no substitute.

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## A New and Better Take on 'Rank-and-Fileism'?

Sheila Cohen, *Ramparts of Resistance: Why Workers Lost Their Power and How to Get It Back*, Pluto Press 2006. Paperback, 248pp, £13.99.

### Reviewed by Gregor Gall

THIS BOOK not only poses, arguably, the key question of historical praxis for those who are, and those who might become, highly conscious trade unionists, but it also tries to provide a sustained answer to the conundrum facing these trade unionists today: why and how is organised labour so much less influential now than it was thirty years ago? Its breadth and scope are thus impressive, covering as it does the period since the 1960s and both Britain and the United States. *Ramparts* also seeks to present a specific and idiosyncratic perspective on both academic and practitioner writing and thinking on union renewal and rebuilding by avoiding, in its own words, setting out a programme for instruction and rather relating to the mass of union member activity as it is presently constituted. In this sense, the book can claim to be a refreshingly non-ultra-left – unions are instructed to do "x" or "y" – left perspective.

One of the underpinning strands of Cohen's overall argument is the injunction that workplace struggle over "bread and butter" (as opposed to just "pounds and pence") workplace issues should not be dismissed as being narrow, economic and incapable of generating higher levels of oppositional consciousness. Consequently, she prioritises workplace activists and "rank-and-file" workers and is sharply critical of the "union bureaucracy" (her terms), where her belief is that capitalism will continually compel workers to resist. But, she insists, those seeking union renewal must begin with "forms of resistance as they arise and where they are" (p.3, all page references to *Ramparts*). Another important strand of her argument is that member-led union democracy is crucial for generating membership participation which is itself crucial

for effective unionism. Thus, membership democracy is the crux for both mobilisation of members and their commitment and agreement with a course of agreed action. Here, Cohen mounts an exposition of “unions as institutions” versus “unions as social movements”, clearly favouring the latter. One could then term her perspective a “rank-and-file” one, of a “syndicalist” rather than “Trotskyist” persuasion. Although Cohen recognises the different traditions of US and UK grassroots union activity, the union movements in each country are sufficiently similar for her to be able to argue for her version of a single rank-and-file strategy for both.

Among the strong points that Cohen paints on this canvas are the following insights. First, the defeats and demobilisation that unions have experienced since the 1970s were not historically inevitable or predetermined (although, surely, the ability of some later struggles to win was less than others in the light of the spread of demobilisation, pessimism and demoralisation following a string of major defeats). Second, the dominant hold of the reformist ideology of the labour movement among workers is predicated on the absence of an alternative vision because of worker’s dominant day-to-day material experience. Third, mass, particularly primary, picketing has become fetishised in the two union movements as the key tactic of militancy to the detriment of solidarity action. Cohen recognises the weakness of this tactic (some-times elevated into a strategy), which is based on physical blockading, because it relies on huge, consistent turn-outs in the face of police countermeasures. Fourth, *Ramparts* conceptually identifies the duality of consciousness inside workers’ heads, whereby it can be both subservient and subversive (p.187).

This review will now turn to examine some of the more debatable, less plausible and more contentious points of Cohen’s analysis and perspective. Throughout, the differences and disagreements articulated are within a broad measure of sympathy and agreement with the overall project that Cohen has engaged in, particularly in regard of her rejection of the vanguard, ultra-left, hyper-optimism and sectarian politics of the existing far left (though this reviewer would not go so far as to reject vanguardism *per se*).

Thus, *Ramparts*’ emphasis on the need to make organic connections with workplace struggles (p.169) and to start with where workers are “at” (p.170) is correct in general, abstracted terms. But the understanding needs to be more nuanced to explain that this must lead to a differentiated, varied approach depending on where it is being applied because, within a correct overall analysis of where workers are “at” with regard to time and space, there are some workers who are in advance of others in terms of union consciousness and levels of struggle. For example, over the last decade postal workers, rail workers and some public sector workers (like PCS members) have experienced

higher levels of struggles, and these struggles have generated different issues for each group with regard to capital and the state. Even here, there have been different areas of militancy and moderation within each group. These nuances must inform how struggles are initiated and approached by those on the inside and outside of those struggles.

That said, among CWU, PCS and RMT members the (“political” as opposed to just “union”) left has made some small advances in introducing and relating wider political questions and issues to the struggles of their fellow members. Cohen’s emphasis is unduly dismissive of the existing left’s role here (pp.171, 172). Granted, the introduction of political ideas through a form of idealism will only be successful with a handful of individuals, but this does not mean that “politics” should and can never be successfully introduced into workplaces. For some workers, in some contexts, visions and ideas that inspire, give hope and ideological grounding are relevant (cf. p.209). Moreover, it is to a large degree erroneous to blame left-wing activists for being too consciously “political” and not concentrating enough on workplace resistance (pp.181, 182, 183), because this does not appear to stack up with many of the studies of workplace unionism where these union activists were identified as leading and organising resistance as well as holding the union’s existing organisation together (see, for example, Ralph Darlington’s *Dynamics of Workplace Unionism*, Mansell, 1997).

So whilst there will be obvious sympathy for Cohen’s critical attitude towards the far left amongst some on the left, there is a sense in which she throws the “baby out with the bathwater”. Despite recognition of much of its destructiveness, there also needs to be some acknowledgement that the far left has helped maintain much workplace organisation in very difficult circumstances. Consequently, the existing far left has been, paradoxically, both a strength and a weakness. Ironically, given her criticism of the far left, Cohen falls into the trap that she accuses others of falling into, namely, setting out a strategy or position. This is an erroneous accusation, since the salient issue is not about setting out a strategy or position as such but whether the strategy and position have the social forces behind them to be capable of being successfully implemented, for otherwise strategies and positions are pretty much ten-a-penny. By this, it is not meant that just stating the social force is the “workers” or the “working class” gets the strategy around this issue. Neither is it meant, however, that a strategy cannot be articulated and then the task of winning support for it set about. Rather, it’s that this must be done with some sense of reality.

In several more areas, Cohen shares more with the far left than she might actually want to (for similarity see Ralph Darlington and Dave Lyddon’s *Glorious Summer: Class Struggle in Britain 1972*, Bookmarks, 2001). Chapters 1 to 6 are replete with con-

tinual examples of strikes and struggles over the last forty odd years. What is the underlying point of this? This may seem a strange question, but Cohen's implicit notion seems to be that it supports her thesis of unrelenting rebellion amongst the rank-and-file. This stems from her overly mechanical, determinist view whereby workers will be forced by capital and capitalism to struggle. There is some general truth in this but only up to a point, for it is not based on a view of the micro-processes through which this can happen (see, for example, John Kelly's *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, Routledge, 1998). The far left has suffered long enough, since the downturn, from this type of syndrome of predictions that "two [separate, individual, isolated] swallows make a summer" so this is particularly unfortunate.

There are a number of salient aspects here. First, the degree of qualitative and quantitative rank-and-file strength in the upturn is also overestimated on many occasions. For example, in Britain in the late 1960s 95% of all strikes were not unofficial (p.10). Rather, 95% of strikes were not official at the time of their inception. This seemingly arcane and pedantic distinction highlights the potentially close and dynamic relationship between members and full-time officials of unions at the time. When workers struck, union strike authorisation was often sufficiently centralised and union organisation sufficiently cumbersome as to mean that the small, workplace-based strikes would invariably be unconstitutional "wildcats". But this did not mean these strikes would be remain "unofficial" or that the strikes were hostile to or independent of all union full-time officials. Large proportions of these strikes would subsequently be made "official". Neither should it be taken to mean that the strikes represent unbridled rebellion. They said as much about bargaining structures and payment structures (the latter point of which Cohen does acknowledge) as they did about unresponsive unions. Second, and of the current period and recent past, there is a mistaken analysis that workplace union organisation and struggle are greater and stronger than they actually are (e.g. pp.131, 212). For example, no account is taken of the choice of which workers are balloted for action nor by whom when Cohen argues her point about ballots in the 1980s (p.95).

Just like one of the texts Cohen frequently cites, namely, Peter Fairbrother's *Unions at the Crossroads* (Mansell, 2000), *Ramparts* engages in a vast overestimation of the actual and potential workplace struggle (p.204). There is no resurgence at the moment, nor is there much prospect of one (or certainly not any more than there has been in the last ten years). This on its own must limit the basis of Cohen's arguments about a renaissance of the rank-and-file. But on top of this, the very limited extent to which the strikes Cohen discusses have the power to enable a transformation in the major-

ity of the involved workers' consciousness (p.205) is apparent and contrary to what she argues. (On this point see, for example, Gregor Gall's *The Meaning of Militancy? Postal Workers and Industrial Relations*, Ashgate, 2003). If this is not case, the type, context and nature of strikes and struggles (e.g., mass/non-mass, indefinite/discontinuous, successful/unsuccessful, in a downturn/upturn etc) must be either clearly specified or theorised, because too much faith is placed in the instrumentalism of struggle producing a higher degree of class-consciousness despite some of Cohen's comments correctly qualifying this (see p.27).

This misplaced faith appears to be derived from the belief that workplace worker resistance can pose a fundamental challenge to capital (pp.175, 177, 180, 181 but cf. p.195) even though it may be of an "instinctive" rather than "explicit" rejection. While there is a kernel of truth here, it is only a partial truth. Moreover, what happens to transformed worker consciousness when it does develop? It is likely to be a house built on sand if the level of struggle falls back or does not widen or the struggles are defeated. This Cohen does belatedly acknowledge (p.208). So linked, it would seem, to the vein of the overly mechanical and determinist view of the *quantitative* element of workers' workplace union struggles is one which is an overly mechanical and determinist view of the *qualitative* element of those struggles. Ironically, this means Cohen does not stick to the framework she set herself in starting with where workers are "at".

Cohen's analysis of "unions as institutions" and "unions as movements" usefully highlights a key tendency of unions, but she labours this distinction too much as it is only a tendency. Unions are far more multi-layered, both horizontally and vertically and across time and space, than she recognises, so that what she posits should be seen as archetypical, and not all-encompassing. Indeed, under the structures and processes of deploying representative democracy, unions engage in specialisations of labour so that some of the most salient issues become how members use and control experts or whether they, the experts, use and control the members. Setting this aside, what is the role of the "union as institution" in a downturn? Apart from the possibility of holding back any emerged struggle, as Cohen would argue, can it not play a useful role in holding an organisation together when the struggle has subsided and is not successful? Can it not give a useful permanence and stability to union organisation through its routine? So there can be tensions between the two forms of union without them necessarily being threats to each other as Cohen argues.

Similarly, the dichotomy between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy is posited as an iron rule rather than a tendency, with the consequence that this weakens its analytical and explanatory power. It is also a tad ahistorical, for while the distinction

may have had a clearer basis in an upsurge of struggle when the rank-and-file could be said to palpably exist, this has not been the case in the later period of the downturn. It has often been pointed out before that a bureaucratisation of shop stewards took place as they achieved full facility-time, leading them to engage in a *modus operandi* separate from but not necessarily in contradiction to membership participation and mobilisation. More widely, is it not the case that the bureaucracy can mobilise members, even in conspiratorial sense, to protect its own position (cf. p.152) and that organising campaigns are often initiated and directed by full-time officers (cf. p.153)? Can the bureaucracy play a different, and more positive, role in a downturn (see above and below)? Therefore, *Ramparts* provides an insufficiently deep and extended discussion of bureaucracy and its relationship to the rank-and-file, given the bureaucracy is so central to the thesis, and even though it examines several theories of bureaucracy. That said, *Ramparts* is on stronger ground when it examines the relationship of ideology, bureaucracy and internal balancing of interests within unions.

For a book that attributes crucial importance to the rank-and-file, the reader is left facing some significant omissions concerning exactly how the rank-and-file is to be organised and what the rank-and-file would look like. These are reasonable questions, because it is not clear if the members are or should be the preferred rank-and-file or whether there is a separation of the rank-and-file from ordinary members (pp.62, 96, 115). On other occasions in *Ramparts*, the rank-and-file appear as the activist milieu. So, the “real” rank-and-file remains insufficiently defined and the reader is left unclear as to whether it currently exists or, if it does not, how and when it will come into being. Moreover, Cohen’s own criticism of the rank-and-file (as they are?) suggests they need some educating. By putting rank-and-file resistance on something akin to an ideological pedestal which is neither justified nor substantiated (pp.183, 198), *Ramparts* does not sufficiently scrutinise whether the rank-and-file has before, or can in the future, generate stable, strategic and coordinated resistance.

When it comes to explaining why the downturn happened and why the ideology of the counter-offensive was so persuasive, *Ramparts* offers an explanation based around several factors, primarily unemployment (p.33), the timidity and betrayals of reformist and bureaucratic union leaders, and the *de facto* left reformism of the far left (see, for example, pp.183, 184), in addition to those reasons which can be surmised from the preceding discussion. While the former factors are of use, in themselves they do not fully explain the quiescence for, in the case of unemployment, workers have sometimes fought rising unemployment during the downturn in major battles. On the bureaucracy, if it did “sell members out”, on what basis was this?

Lack of morality and character? Where is the role for union leaders backing down because they feel their union is isolated and will not get the necessary support to embolden them even when it is promised to them by a fellow union? Even if their calculation was wrong, is it any more in this regard than a wrong calculation? Where is the role for strategic and tactical retreats?

Again, a further, more elaborated and contextualised discussion of individual factors is needed. The limited development of working class political consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s (and the left’s role here) must be assigned some role in explaining why the counter-offensive was transformed into a downturn beginning in the mid-1970s and why it intensified after 1979. Paul Smith’s book *Unionisation and Union Leadership: The Road Haulage Industry* (Mansell, 2001) has some useful insights here. Nonetheless, Cohen’s discussion of the sullen worldview underlying workers’ statements like “What can you do?” and “It just ain’t gonna happen” is instructive of the ways workers rationalise their stance after a downturn has begun.

In asserting that Bennism (and left social democracy) was a divergence from the “real” or “proper” struggle, Cohen suggests that workers would otherwise have been receptive to revolutionary ideas, which is not proven in any (including a counterfactual) sense. Not all the left was “infatuated” with the Alternative Economy Strategy, for many of the Trotskyist organisations did focus on rank-and-fileism. Broadly speaking, with less competition from other (reformist) ideas, revolutionary ideas should have had a clearer run, but this does not imply they would have been more successful in being taken up by workers. Furthermore, a deeper exploration of workers’ consciousness might have unearthed the possibility that reformist ideas can play a transitional role (which Cohen does later acknowledge, p.218) and that workers may not differentiate between reformist ideas *per se* and the reformist goals of revolutionary ideas. This would have countered the way in which Cohen argues the conspiratorial notion that struggle is being held back by various people and processes, where workers’ consciousness was destined to grow but for this and that. Nonetheless, Cohen’s discussion of strategies to prefigure socialism is important, but it needs further elaboration in terms of its transitional and transformational potential (pp.43, 44 and later), because Cohen does not convincingly prove that such AES strategies were either counterproductive *per se* or just in the context of Britain in the 1970s (particularly given subsequent developments in South America since the late 1990s which can be said to be prefigurative of socialism).

There are also several epistemological and methodological weaknesses in the overly agitprop and polemical style of the book. One is the Dave Spart language of exaggeration and hyperbole, seen most obviously in the use of the terms “be-

trayal” and “sell out” but evident throughout. Another common example is the use of the “fail to” sentence construction where union leaders or activists “failed to” do “x” or “y”. The problem is this construction assumes that these actors took on the imputed tasks knowingly and willingly but did not carry them out properly or fully, or it assigns an intention and motivation to them which may not be justified and is certainly not substantiated with evidence. It often ends up being a form of counter-intuitive “false consciousness”.

Flowing from this mindset, the book is littered with too many poorly substantiated and poorly explained assertions and statements to make it impregnable to criticism (see, for example, those concerning postal workers, p.19, lack of coordination p.25, Manchester sit-ins p.27, death of MFD p.38, transformation of internal networks p.40, false hope of Bennism p.42, dockers’ defeat p.81, ambulance workers p.98, tugboat action p.122, UPS union ready to stand up pp.125, 126, union growth p.151 and so on). So the essential, if not even critical, “why” and “how” questions are not fully or convincingly answered. (This is not a roundabout way of saying the reviewer does not agree with the explanations put forward.)

Although there is an articulated connection between chapters 1 to 6 and 7 to 9, it is not sufficiently tight as to be wholly convincing and, therefore, Cohen’s argument would have been better served by isolating the issues in a thematic manner throughout the book, from which supporting examples from both sides of the Atlantic could have then been deployed. Finally, in this regard, the source of evidence cited in a significant number of cases like an IMG or SWP pamphlet or a *Labor Notes* article is not sufficiently credible and robust to support the point Cohen is making: too often publications are cited which are well known for “bending the stick” a certain way politically or for being of an activist and interventionist not analytical bent. Because the criticisms of other perspectives are so sharp and so stark, this is an important weakness. It’s tantamount to the shop steward irresponsibly ignoring time keeping and opening him/herself up to management attack.

As stated at the outset, *Ramparts* not only poses *the* key question for unionists but also tries to provide an answer to the conundrum facing these trade unionists today: how can organised labour’s power be rebuilt? In conclusion, how well does Cohen accomplish these two tasks of explaining why workers lost their power and how they can get it back? *Ramparts* covers many of the key areas and issues but often does so in an interesting but unsatisfactory manner and with some interesting but unsatisfactory outcomes. If what Cohen argued was manifest, in Britain and the US we would be further down the road to rebuilding oppositional, strong and independent union movements. This is far from dismissing *Ramparts* out of hand for two

reasons, in addition to the strengths outlined earlier. First, it can genuinely prompt a useful discussion and dialogue because it moves away, in some major respects, from trite ultra-left formulations and analysis that are common amongst the far left activist milieu. Second, and notwithstanding the critique here – indeed as evidenced by the critique here – *Ramparts* engages with the issues at hand in a far tighter manner than other recent and similar books like Rob Sewell’s *In the Cause of Labour: History of British Trade Unionism* (Wellred, 2003). My message is thus: let *Ramparts* stimulate your mind by allowing it to engage you on the key issues at hand.

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## LETTER

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### The AGS and Iraq

IN THEIR diatribe against Tony Greenstein in *What Next?* No.30 (‘Lies, Damn Lies and Tony Greenstein’), Daniel Randall and Sacha Ismail refer to “his recent membership of the Alliance for Green Socialism; an organisation which positively supports the occupation of Iraq by UN troops!”

The Alliance for Green Socialism does not support the occupation of Iraq by anyone’s troops. The policy of the AGS is stated in the following 2005 conference resolution:

“*The Alliance for Green Socialism notes that*

- *the United States and the United Kingdom were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis by means of sanctions before the 2003 invasion of Iraq;*

- *the US and UK peddled lies about weapons of mass destruction in an attempt to justify their 2003 invasion of Iraq;*

- *the 2003 invasion of Iraq was illegal under international law;*

- *the invasion and occupation of Iraq has already caused an estimated 100,000 civilian Iraqi deaths;*

- *the continuing occupation of Iraq by US and UK forces is illegal.*

*The AGS believes that the principal motive for the 2003 invasion of Iraq was an imperialist desire for control of Iraq’s oil resources.*

*The AGS therefore calls for the immediate withdrawal of UK and other occupying forces from Iraq.*

*The AGS further calls for the payment to Iraq of reparations by the US and the UK for the huge damages, both to life and property, caused by their illegal invasion.”*

Indeed, the AGS was actively calling for the immediate withdrawal of all occupying troops while the Stop the War Coalition was still refusing to back immediate withdrawal.

The Alliance for Green Socialism awaits an apology from Randall and Ismail.

**Mike Davies**

Chair, Alliance for Green Socialism