

## A century passes

They were the worst of times. They were the even worse of times. The century which offered the promise of providing abundant wealth for all has been characterised by the jackboot, the mushroom cloud and the sizzling stink of Macdonald's culture.

At the beginning of the twentieth century there were high hopes and big ideas. It was to be the Age of Science. Industrialisation had made it possible to produce plenty for all. It was to be the century of Democracy. Votes for all meant that the people's voice would count from now on. So, what happened?

Capitalism happened. It began as the capitalist century and it ends in the same rut. Capitalism is not an ethos or a state of mind. It is a system. It is based upon minority class ownership of the means whereby we live and production for profit. Its economic laws are inviolable; there is no democratic mandate strong enough to force capitalism to operate against its inherent, systemic nature. A ceaseless conflict between the accumulation of profit and the satisfaction of needs, and an attendant struggle between those who possess the means of wealth production and those who produce goods and services, is innate to capitalism. The problems which result from this conflict and struggle are not accidental or the results of bad government: they are endemic to the system. It is no more possible to eradicate from capitalism the conflict between profit and need than it would be to make cancer of the body compatible with good health.

There have been two main approaches to capitalism in the twentieth century: the liberal Left and the conservative Right. The former have expressed a sentimental opposition to the effects of capitalism. This reaction against the beast is not insincere or without ethical force. It is based upon a humane distaste for what capitalism is doing to society. The Left has spent much of this century expressing this distaste, often with compelling eloquence and force. It has busied itself with endless schemes to remove this and then that effect of capitalism. The Left has never been a single movement for change, but a diverse collection of fragmented campaigns, each hoping that the moral virtue of their position can break down the iron bars of the capitalist prison. Some of the bars have indeed been bent, and others, once bent for a while, have been straightened and strengthened. The Left has only ever concerned itself with remedying effects. Even when it has adopted apparent alternatives—Russia, nationalisation, welfare states, Cuba—these have only ever been state-run versions of capitalism. The tragedy of the twentieth-century Left has been its self-righteous belief in the moral power of its chosen sentiments alongside a deeply conservative resistance to fundamental alternatives to the system which it has derided as utopian and unrealisable.

The conservative Right has accepted the brutal rationality of the capitalist system and has spent the century seeking to justify as inevitable everything that is cruel and socially divisive. In terms of capitalism, they have been right. In opposing every measure for the long-term improvement of life under capitalism they have recognised a truth which is that you cannot impose rules of moral decency upon a system which can only thrive well by being exploitative, oppressive and callous. At its worst, and historically most unforgivable, the Right has embraced the sickest and most disfiguring of the twentieth-century's ideas: racism, national chauvinism, dictator-worship and pride in war. Bevan

was right, of course: Tories are lower than vermin. But the Tories were right as well: Bevan's moral outrage was one long piss in the wind of history.

If one attempted to draw up an inventory of capitalism's casualties in the twentieth century it would be longer than the collected works of any encyclopaedia. How many people have had their lives destroyed in its pointless wars? How many more have had bodies ruined by injury in war? Or in industrial accidents where human safety has been sacrificed for profit? How many have been thrown into its prisons simply for violating the laws of property and class rule? How many were gassed to death for being the wrong "race"? How many were thrown from their jobs and forced to stand idle? How many were denied an education that would allow them to develop their full potential? How many died waiting for health care? How many starved to death in a world of plenty? How many gave up hope and killed themselves? How many are there left who feel battered and only partly alive after years of struggling with money?

The inventory can be expanded and the depressing statistics, some of them unknowable because the victims are countless, tell the story of a wasted century. Yes, of course there were great moments and we will remember them—but they have occurred despite the system and not because of it.

At the end of the twentieth century the mood contrasts sharply with the hopes of the beginning. The reformers, once so confident, have become meek and modest. In 1900 they campaigned to end unemployment once and for all. Now they campaign to stop extra means-testing of the disabled unemployed. They started out intending to ban bombs (though never all of them); they've ended the century seeking to ban bomb testing, though not the weapons themselves. There has been an undignified and squalid accommodation by the Left to the logic and even the rhetoric of capitalism. At the same time, the Right has learned a few tricks of presentation about appearing to be caring and humane. The two historic wings of capitalist ideology have merged into a single, mushy fudge of dull consensus.

It is this bland acquiescence to an endless future of capitalism—"the end of History", if you don't mind—which characterises the politics of the conventional political vision for the next century. You want to know what the future looks like? Well, look in your rear-view mirror and you'll get a pretty good picture. Yes, it will be capitalism with modems and moving pavements and viagra and tikka-flavoured Big Macs, but there is no vision of anything new or challenging or exciting.

Close to parliament, and now overtopping it, is a vast Wheel. People can buy seats on the Wheel and whizz round and round until their money runs out and they must pay again. What an appropriate emblem for the twentieth century. You pay. You go round in circles. You get back to where you started. You pay again. It is historically fitting that the Wheel stands over parliament, reminding it and us of history's demented rhythm in this passing century. We paid. We went round in circles. We got back to where we started. We paid again. Anyone for a twenty-first century spin? Anyone feeling slightly sick of the sensation?

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