DEMOCRACY VS. THE ELECTION

Popularism vs. Elitism
Brexiters vs. Remainers
Information vs. Fake News

What about the only real choice:
CAPITALISM
or
SOCIALISM

also:
China
The Lexiteers
Neo-Liberalism
By the time this issue of the Socialist Standard comes out, we will be halfway through a general election campaign. We will all have had leaflets through our letter boxes full of vote-catching promises and extolling the merits of some candidate. The media will have been concentrating, day after day, on the claims and counter-claims of the groups of career politicians known as ‘parties’.

But it’s a charade. People know from experience that ‘changing governments changes nothing’ and that their daily life of going to work, paying the bills and bringing up their family continues much the same whichever group of politicians forms the government. They listen to the politicians’ promises without really believing them and vote for one or other of them without illusions. They don’t consider this central to their lives; it’s something they do because they have been asked to.

However, there is a more serious side to elections. They are a time when groups of politicians compete against each other for a chance to run the capitalist state. This state is there to uphold the capitalist system, based on the ownership and control of productive resources by a few who are thereby enabled to enjoy a privileged lifestyle. Due to past pressure from the excluded many and splits in the ruling class, those who run the capitalist state have to pass via winnable elections where almost the whole electorate is made up of the many. Winning an election gives them – and the capitalist system – the legitimacy of popular endorsement.

This means that elections are a time when the many are being asked to endorse capitalism by voting for politicians who, if and when they get into office, will uphold the capitalist system, even if to try to improve people’s lives. But, as capitalism is a profit-making system that can only run in the interest of the few who own society’s productive resources, no government can make it work for the many who don’t. This is why all reformist governments have failed, and will fail. From the point of view of improving people’s life, elections are irrelevant, as, while governments propose, it is capitalism, via its relentless economic law of ‘profits first’ imposed by the market, that disposes.

This is why socialists refuse to participate in the charade of pretending to believe in the politicians’ promises and voting for one or other of them without illusions or as a ‘lesser evil’. We won’t vote for any of them as that is to give the legitimacy of popular approval to the continuation of capitalism. Which we refuse.

To show that we think that voting could and should be part of the process of replacing capitalism with socialism we do go to the polling station and cast a write-in vote for ‘WORLD SOCIALISM’. Where we can, we also put up candidates standing for socialism and nothing but – in this election there are two, whose election addresses can be found in this issue. There, those who want socialism can vote directly for it.

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Trading up the motorway by the back door under 'X's rule'

Credit and Control in China

One consequence of new technology has been a vast increase in the extent of surveillance of people, whether by the state or private companies. CCTV, facial recognition, tracking the use of debit and credit cards, having access to phone records, and other ways of recording a person's use of social networks and the rest of the internet: all this shows how much information (often using big data and processed by artificial intelligence) is held about people. The world's largest economy is working on new safety technologies and mechanisms are incentivizing trustworthiness and restricting the degree of control greater than in China, where the 'social credit system' is the key to online solution! Who cares about the petrol you use. What we are dealing with is the new digital evolution and the ongoing process of competition and convergence. In the meantime, the government is pursuing this new initiative, which is called the 'Social Credit System.'

The Social Credit System is a comprehensive national system designed to integrate the country's various credit systems into a unified, comprehensive database. This system is intended to promote social integrity and fairness by rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. The system is based on the principle that individuals and businesses with good behavior will be rewarded with higher credit scores, while those with bad behavior will face higher costs and restrictions.

The Social Credit System is a significant step forward in China's social management. It is a comprehensive and systematic approach to improving social management and governance. The system is built around these lines so that social credit scores have become an industry in its own right.

The Social Credit System has a wide range of applications, from personal credit scores to corporate credit scores. It is used to evaluate individuals' and businesses' creditworthiness and to determine their credit scores. These scores can have a significant impact on people's lives and businesses, affecting decisions such as whether to lend money, extend credit, or provide services.

In socialism you won't want, or have to, zoom up the motorway or HS2 link for 200 miles to get to work. As work will be voluntary anyway, you'll find something you can do in your local area, within comfortable walking distance, or work online. If you can't, you can move somewhere else without the worry of rents, mortgages or desirable catchment areas for your kids. You probably won't need to cook very often because it makes no sense to waste collective time and resources cooking separately when you could take turns cooking together in free community kitchens.

Life is meant to be enjoyed, not endured, and that is best done slowly and at leisure. The only need for speed that socialism has is right now, in capitalism, which we urgently need to kill off before it finally spins out of the fast lane and kills us all in the burning wreckage of the planet. PJS

PAUL BENNETT

Demands in such cases, and so theoretically he be removed from any blacklist, but this does not always happen in practice, especially as there is little supervision of the Chinese legal system.

Various kinds of infraction, many of them pretty trivial, are covered, such as smoking in a no-smoking part of a train, spending too much time playing video games, posting fake news, quarreling with neighbours or walking your dog without a lead. In contrast, being a ‘good citizen’ can earn you discounts on energy bills and even boost your profile on a dating site. The supposed intention is to combat corruption and fraud, but of course what is done goes well beyond anything that could be relevant to that. For instance, people’s mobile phone usage is closely tracked. And there are supposedly 200 million surveillance cameras in China, which can snoop on people’s activities.

The system is a part of much wider moves towards greater repression, such as those against Uighurs in Xinjiang, Tibetans and the protests in Hong Kong. Xi Jinping has removed limits on the terms of office of the president, so could in theory remain in charge for life. Human Rights Watch has recently referred to ‘increasing repression under Xi’s rule’, including the jailing of journalists, academics, religious teachers, protestors against sexual harassment and others. In addition to keeping tabs on individuals, there are also mechanisms for tracking what companies do, supposedly to cut down on fraud and ensure compliance with the law. Overseas companies operating in China may have to conform to even more government requirements too.

Overall, and however much it is fully implemented in the future, the social credit system is designed to keep Chinese workers on the straight and narrow, penalising anyone who steps out of line. Any resistance to the rule of the ‘Communist’ Party and the ruling capitalist class will be one of many actions that lead to being penalised in one way or another.

Credit and Control in China

Getting Out of the Fast Lane

If you’re a driver, you probably know that it’s a bad idea to ‘drift’ and have to find proper parking spaces. Not to worry, that’s just their choice to work in the gig economy, and it looks great for the government’s employment figures too.

And then there’s just Eat. Who wants to go to the tedious labour of cooking one’s own food, or even going out of the house to get a takeaway, when you can get someone to drive it right to your door? Environmental/social objections? Nonsense, see above.

Speed is good, it created the modern world. And what can we do with the time we save? Work harder, buy faster, die quicker, and make the rich richer! But don’t worry, just take your time and enjoy the sights! Don’t laugh, but many companies right now are working on new safety technologies for airships, which don’t use dangerous hydrogen but perfectly-safe helium. (How airships could return to our crowded skies, BBC, 8 November - bbc.in/36KnX7D).

There are many advantages to airships over jet planes, not only safety, fuel economy and heavy freight haulage. And even though they’re slow, they’ll still outrun a Maserati in top gear, believe me! The future of air travel is in the sky, (in a sense this is rather like the idea of credit scores in the UK and elsewhere, which provide a numerical statement of how likely a person is to repay money they owe. If you have a low score, you will probably find it difficult to borrow money, take out a credit card or have a mortgage; and even if you are able to do these things, you are likely to be charged a higher interest rate. Providing credit scores has become an industry in its own right.)

Part of what happens in China is rather similar, with people being given a social credit score by various private companies. There are also some local government schemes which rely on ‘good deeds’ such as donating to charity or giving blood and on bad ones such as going through a red light or being caught speeding. As a result. But there are also much grander plans for a system run at national and governmental level, though this is not planned to come into existence until some time in 2020, and it is not even clear if that date can be kept. A Chinese State Council document from 2014 described the social credit system as ‘an important component of the Socialist market economic system and the socialist governance system... its reward and punishment mechanisms are incentivising trustworthiness and restricting untrustworthiness’. Despite what is sometimes claimed, though, social credit is not as yet a pervasive system that intrudes into everyone’s daily life to snoop on what they’ve been up to.

People can be blacklisted in a number of ways. For instance, the journalist Liu Ju writes about censorship and government corruption. Apart from being fined, he was banned from flying and some train lines, without being informed in advance.

A similar ban on travel by plane or train affects several million people. It is possible to pay the fine or whatever the court
Socialist governments can make money out of the capitalist system that even the richest class cannot ignore. In the wake of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry perhaps it’s time to look at the history of British public inquiry and assess their place within the body politic of this country. Let’s look at the origin, motivation, reality and effectiveness of this very British institution.

Having its origins in the 1920s the PI was initially set up to deal with public unease concerning natural or technical disasters such as train crashes and floods etc. But in 1957 there was a great scandal involving corrupt dealers making fortunes out of ‘inside information’ concerning bank rates. A public tribunal was set up and successfully managed to assure the public that it would not happen again – which, of course, it did and continues to do. This probably gave the elite the confidence that this was a way of seeming to do something about such scandals while also covering up any major implications for themselves and the capitalist system as a whole.

However when the next great scandal, the Hillsborough Affair they chose the wrong ‘pair of safe hands’ in the form of Lord Denning. Although he is supposed to bring this about. If, on the other hand, the government borrows – and the Greens say it will come from borrowing, the Tories say that all of it will. When a government borrows – and the Greens say it will come from borrowing and also from increasing direct taxation of the profits of businesses. Neither of these two is suggesting conjuring money out of thin air that they believe the banks possess) to be transferred to a public body that will issue ‘debt-free’ money. The government could, as these theories in effect advocate, simply print the promised amounts of money but, as most people know this would cause roaring inflation, the leaders of these two parties don’t see this as a vote-catcher. The Tories know well that capital is active on profits and that anything that impedes this risks provoking an economic downturn. While Labour and the Greens are saying that most of the extra money will come from borrowing, the Tories say that all of it will. When a government borrows – and given the amounts involved here, it will have to be from capitalists – the interest payable has to come from taxes. This is not a problem as long as the economy is expanding; if this is the case even an increase in the interest rate won’t cause a problem as the increased revenue from taxes will be enough to cover this without requiring a reduction in other government spending. If, on the other hand, the economy is not expanding, as regularly happens from time to time, interest payments will eat into other spending. The Tory and Labour spending promises both assume a continuously expanding economy; Labour is even supposed to bring this about. When, as proposed, a government spends money on infrastructure there will be some initial economic expansion through construction firms and other contractors having money to extend their business and take on workers. However, there is no guarantee that this will be translated as the capitalist economy is not driven by government or consumer spending, but by capitalist investment in profitable productive activity. This is not something governments can control as, among many others, the last Labour government discovered.

Because the economy happened to be expanding, Gordon Brown assumed that this would continue indefinitely. He even proclaimed the end of the boom/slump cycle. He was wrong and, when the boom inevitably ended, his and subsequent governments found themselves in financial difficulty and, to protect profits, had to cut back their spending.

Aware of how capitalism works and of past experience of how it has worked, we can confidently predict that neither the Tories nor Labour will be able to honour their election promises. Eventually, for reasons beyond their control, the capitalist economy will stall and they will be forced to renge on them. History will repeat itself.

COOKING THE BOOKS

Fantasy politics (and economics)

You can tell it’s election time. The parties are making all sorts of extravagant promises. The Tories are promising to spend an extra £20 billion a year on hospitals, schools and other infrastructure. Labour is promising an extra £35 billion but, as they have no prospect of being put in a position to honour this, they can promise what they like.

It is not that the physical resources don’t exist to improve hospitals, schools, transport or do what is needed to combat climate change. They do but, under capitalism, mobilising them has to be paid for, so it’s legitimate to ask where the money will come from.

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VERY OCCASSIONALLY an outrage occurs within the capitalist system that even the richest class cannot ignore. In the wake of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry perhaps it’s time to look at the history of British public inquiry and assess their place within the body politic of this country. Let’s look at the origin, motivation, reality and effectiveness of this very British institution.

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THE OCEANS remain the last unexplored region of the Earth. But the recent advances in technology and knowledge are pushing back the boundaries so that humans via capitalism are now within sight of opening up yet another part of the planet for plunder. However, the availability of resources has given rise to new international quarrels about how to divide up the spoils of the seas. Disputes over territorial limits of national waters are now commonplace. We are accustomed to the concept of land-grabbing by corporations but now it has expanded to capturing the possession of the assets of the ocean, stealing resources and denying local fishing communities access. A report has been published which is a research and advocacy organisation. It defines ocean grabbing as a ‘major process of the world’s oceans and fisheries resources, including marine, coastal and inland fisheries. Ocean grabbing is occurring mainly through policies, laws, and practices that are (re)defining and (re)allocating access, use and control of fisheries resources away from small-scale fisher folk and their communities, and often with little concern for the adverse environmental consequences... Another important driver of ocean grabbing is the increasing demand and the increasing scarcity of resources and new technologies that enable the extraction of resources in formerly inaccessible areas.’

Global fish stocks that feed hundreds of millions of the planet’s population are being churned out at unsustainable levels. The so-called ‘high seas’ are fisheries that fall outside the bounds of national jurisdiction. ‘High seas’ fisheries are designated as either limited-access or open-access fisheries. The new policies of grabbing the high seas lead to abuse of those resources in the short-term, disregarding the longer-term welfare. The ‘tragedy of the commons’ however takes place within the context of capitalism which is a system based on individual self-interest rather than the wellbeing of all. The management of resources as the collective heritage of communities and these leaves the commons vulnerable to private interests. Thus, the TNI report explains it would be more correct to speak of the ‘tragedy of the private exploitation of the commons’ which undermines sustainable traditional management practices. An earlier 2014 report by the TNI on Ocean Grabbing (bit.ly/2Nb9yRf) shows how the rise of market-based fishing policies that favour large-scale aquaculture industries is systematically destroying fishing communities of their livelihoods. The report cites examples of luxury beach resorts in Sri Lanka where fishers can no longer get to the coast, the destruction of mangrove areas in Ecuador to promote export-oriented shrimp aquaculture that has destroyed fishing habitats, and the dramatic rise of ‘Rights Based Fishing’ (RBF) policies that have handed over large tracts of ocean to industrial fishing companies in Europe, Canada and elsewhere.

India’s coastline is more than 7,500 km long, and about 3.5 million people make a living from fishing and related activities. There are more than 3,000 fishing villages along the coast. Changes to India’s Coastal Regulation Zone rules in 2017 have lifted the ban on land reclamation for commercial purposes. Fishers say the changes will lead to environmental damage, displacement of local communities and the livelihoods of millions who depend on the sea for their survival. ‘The coastal lands are ours by tradition. The state plans to take them away with this law,’ said Rajhans Tapke. ‘Our land will be lost, our access to the sea will be affected, our catch will be affected. How will we live? We protect the sea, the coast, the marine life; our future, our livelihoods are threatened because they want to give our land to movie stars and wealthy people who want sea views and beach sports’ (bit.ly/2Qbd8tR). Only when we reach a rational economic system where the wellbeing of all is the guiding principle and we are no longer subjected to the blind market forces of capitalism can the natural resources of the land and oceans be used to benefit all humanity. ‘When socialism goes further, more than pieous hopes and wishful thinking that our planet is not going to be abused in pursuit of profit.’

ALIO
Brexit left? We look at those on the left – the Lexiteers – who campaign for Britain to leave the EU.

I n all the hullabaloo over whether workers in the United Kingdom should be exploited within the European Union or exploited outside of the European Union, it is often overlooked that it is not only right-wing cranks who are extolling the virtues of Brexit.

There was, and remains, a considerable ‘Lexit’ chorus, chipping their two penceworth into the debate (and part of the reason they are overlooked is that the millionaires backing the right-wing version of Brexit chipped in their two millionworth).

Of course, they’ve been there since the beginning. When Harold Wilson’s Labour government tried to take the UK into the EU (then the European Economic Community (EEC)), the Labour Party was substantially split.

Joining the EEC was seen as joining a rich man’s club, with some leftists suggesting alignment with the former Empire (by then rebranded as the Commonwealth), and some even angling towards alignment with the state capitalist economies in COMECON. There was a recognition that capital concentration was being constrained within national boundaries.

Tony Benn voiced worries that membership of the EEC would disrupt the Whitehall departmental balance of power, giving undue prominence to the Foreign Office over others. However, behind all such concerns, there was ultimately a rump patriotism being expressed.

Basic nationalism

The New Left historian E.P. Thompson wrote of the working class in Britain. Even such a class as this, composed of people who are not only workers, but also proprietors, proprietors of foreign trade would be established. This basis the road would be cleared for an appeal to the workers of Europe and the world. A continental plan of production, with a democratic socialist Britain, ending the scarecrow of Stalinist totalitarianism would open the road to the underdeveloped world.

A Socialist United States of Europe would be the first step to a Socialist World (bit.ly/2qKVZLA).

Arguably, part of this is developed from a reading of one line in the Communist Manifesto ‘Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national’ perhaps neglecting the continuation ‘though not in the bourgeois sense of the word’.

Such positioning was also helped by the fact that it was the forces that first mooted joining the EEC, it would be natural for the left to reflexively shy away from a project associated with their brand rivals. This became an article of faith for the Labour left, especially within the Campaign Group (hence Corby’s basic oppositional position to the EU). The converse was also true, and in the Blair years, support for the EU became a position Blairites could use to position themselves against the left in their own party and against what was then known as the Eurosceptic right. It even had the virtue of presenting itself as an intrinsically internationalist position. Hence the Labour Party became a predominantly pro-EU party, such that whatever ‘Lexiteers’ took part in the Brexit referendum, they were drowned out.

It should be noted that in the 2016 referendum campaign, it was the slightly strange Karoly Karolyi, far from being a Labour leftist who was the face and vote of Labour within the official Leave campaign, allowing herself to be pictured sailing down the Thames with Nigel Farage. The Labour Leave group itself was largely made up of the old Labour right, rather than its left.

Brexit noises

That didn’t mean that the lies of Arthur Scargill’s rump Socialist Labour Party’ weren’t out in the woods making Brexit screeching noises. ‘Left leave’ were supported by the Communist Party, SWP and the SWP breakaway Counterfire. Their propaganda focussed on the EU as an undemocratic neo-liberal club. The same could be said of the UK by groups campaigning for independence for Yorkshire and Cornwall, but logical consistency is not the point. As usual, doubtful, such an organisation was more about building recruits for their own parties than a consistent position. All their complaints about the EU would still exist if the UK leaves, and walking away would be abandoning fellow workers who are in the continuity EU.

The most prominent Lexiteer has been Ken McCluskey. As the general secretary of Unite he has been the biggest voice for Leave in the Labour movement, and the one with the most clout. Calling for Brexit on our own terms tantamount to what has become the Labour Party position, to leave with retention of protected guaranteed workers’ rights, a customs union and access to the single market and ‘for the ending of austerity, and a proactive strategy of investment in public services to mitigate the impact of Brexit. The principle of well-funded, publicly owned and freely accessible public services must be central to this strategy’ (bit.ly/2k3X5Hk).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the culmination of the left’s flirtation with Brexit was the various leftists who have joined the Brexit Party, as instanced in particular by Claire Fox, now an MEP for the party. This is less surprising than it first sounds. Fox is one of the members of the former ‘Revolutionary Communist Party’ clustered around spiked magazine, that in the 80s turned away from traditional leftist and towards a form of libertarianism and contrarianism (a path also trod by the late un lamented Christopher Hitchens).

It has proved an effective way of getting attention as a pundit, since their left pose gets them through the balance door, to eventually talk right. In 2018, the Guardian journalist George Monbiot uncovered that Spiked! had received $300,000 from the Koch brothers foundation (7 December, 2018 - bit.ly/2q41Ruf). The Koch brothers’ money is notoriously used to further oligarchic billionaire ends in US politics. The Spiked! crowd maintain the money was for ‘free speech’ events (and opposing no-platform and defending free speech is a core part of the Spiked libertarianism).

Fox maintains that she stood as ‘a democrat, a supporter of liberty, agency and sovereignty’ (spiked-online.com/2019/05/31/the-brexit-party-is-the-start-of-a-new-politics/) noting the RCP was a long time ago. She also maintains the core of her vote was ‘solid Labour voters’ including trade union officials. They can only take at face value her claims that her positions are genuine and not providing pinkwash to the Brexit Party (though that is hard to reconcile with the known public positions of the Party’s founder and leader Nigel Farage).

Strangely enough, Lexiteers are rarely noted for strong unionism and did not bother to join the TUC. They were not unions. They once called themselves ‘the socialist workers republic’. They didn’t think they needed unions. They were not part of the TUC, but a breakaway country can rework itself and spread to the world. The fantasy that a breakaway country can rework itself and spread to the world is pernicious and persistent: any real change can only come from a movement that is international in form and practice.

Fantasies

There remains an anti-establishment kick to the Brexit movement, a reflex that says if only we stood alone, things could be so much different. Into that void are projected all sorts of fantasies of an authentic British democracy, freed from the binding rules of treaties. Left and right alike see opportunity in that space. The reality is that the integration in practice of the UK with the EU means the scope for independent action will be constrained for the foreseeable future.

The lesson of Ireland is obvious, which broke away politically from the UK, but which still found itself economically close to Britain for decades. Even today, it is the part of the EU most threatened by Brexit. The fantasy that a breakaway country can rework itself and spread to the world is pernicious and persistent: any real change can only come from a movement that is international in form and practice.
What is this election about?

The wide view

Our world contains massive resources – raw materials, systems of manufacture, communications technology, sophisticated transport. Enough to give everyone a comfortable and fulfilling life. It’s also beset by perennial problems – wars, never-ending poverty, economic and other kinds of insecurity. The profit motive of society means that life is becoming more and more commercialised and people are increasingly isolated from one another with drug abuse and mental illness on the increase. Capitalism – and governments – are proving incapable of dealing with climate change and other threats to the environment. The standard of living may have risen for some but the quality of life deteriorates.

Why don’t we change our world so that we can have the benefit of the resources without the problems?

How can we do that?

We can do that by holding the world’s resources in common and using them directly to serve everyone’s needs instead of just producing ad nauseam to create ever greater profits for a tiny minority. This is genuine socialism – a moneyless society of free access to goods and services. Forget about the other uses of the word.

So, we vote you in and you create this wonderful world for us. How can we trust you to do that?

You can’t and neither can we. The new society we’re putting forward can only be created when a majority of people like you actively decide to do it. You can use us, the Socialist Party, as an instrument of the democratic revolution we are advocating, but you yourselves must be in control of what happens.

But isn’t this all fantasy politics? People are too selfish to put everything at risk for the sake of pie in the sky?

It’s true that we all have to live in the here and now, but how far off the socialist society we advocate depends on when people are prepared to take democratic action (i.e. vote) to establish it. More than a century of attempts to reform capitalism have shown that none of its major problems can be removed. So it’s clear that if we do nothing about socialism ‘in the meantime’, the meantime lasts forever. And we are putting off perhaps for all time the greatest advance that human society could ever make.

So does this election matter? Does Brexit matter?

This election is about one way or another of organising the profit system, capitalism, so it doesn’t matter which of the major parties is elected. Nothing will change. Brexit is a small detail in that system, so it doesn’t matter that an arrangement has been made to manipulate that detail in the interests of the tiny minority who hold most of the wealth. What does matter is how many voters are convinced by the lies that they will live a better life, with a decent job and a decent wage, when the facts are that the standard of living may have risen for some but the quality of life deteriorates.

Hasn’t socialism been tried and shown not to work?

No. Small political minorities have tried concentrating resources in the hands of the state, but that has just continued the profit system in another, often more oppressive, form. That isn’t socialism. Instead we are talking about a rational and sustainable society where people are the Earth’s custodians, not its destroyers, where they We are talking about a society of material abundance, without buying and selling, where everyone has access to what they need without the ratting system called money.

We are talking about material abundance, without buying and selling, where everyone has access to what they need without the ratting system called money. We are talking about a rational and sustainable society where people are the Earth’s custodians, not its destroyers, where they contribute the knowledge, skills and effort to maintain it.

This is a system that will make 21st-century capitalism look like the Dark Ages. Hardly anyone dares conceive of a society after capitalism, so powerful is it hold on the collective mind. But we do and that is why we are putting the debate out into the open. Capitalism will do all it can to discredit the idea of world socialism. Don’t let it succeed. Take a first step by voting for our candidate in Cardiff Central, Brian Johnson.
It’s not neo-liberalism that’s to blame – it’s capitalism

In Marx’s day the government that should not interfere in the operation of the capitalist economy was known as ‘Manchestrian’ after the city in the north of England where capitalist industry was then most developed and whose capitalists wanted to be free to pursue profits as they thought fit.

Its advocates preached ‘free trade’ (the abolition of tariffs on imported goods and bounties on exported goods) and letting market forces operate freely. They even opposed laws against adulteration and to limit the hours of work of those they employed. Also known as ‘economic liberalism’, it had roots in the eighteenth century in French manufacturers and merchants who told the royal bureaucracy to leave them alone and let them get on with their business (‘laissez faire’) and in Adam Smith’s curious theory that behind market forces was some ‘invisible hand’ ensuring that these operated for the common good.

However, a practical problem soon arose over industries and services which all capitalist businesses had to make use of such as transport (roads, canals, railways) and communications (post, telegraph). Capitalists did not want these to be in the hands of any one group of their number who would thereby be in a position to hold the rest of them to ransom and charge monopoly prices. This why in Britain, as early as 1844, a Railways Act contained a clause providing, if need be, for state ownership, so-called ‘nationalisation’. In Europe railways had been in the hands of the state almost from the beginning because of their strategic importance for transporting troops in times of war. In the event Britain settled for price regulation by the government, which was also a violation of ‘laissez faire’.

Economic liberalism never caught on in its entirety outside Britain as ‘free trade’ was seen, not without justification, by rival capitalists in other countries as a means of giving British capitalists a competitive advantage. They demanded that their governments ‘protect’ them from such competition through tariffs on imported British goods. Beyond that, however, they embraced the doctrine that governments should not interfere with their pursuit of profits.

Enter Keynes

Between the two world wars of the last century even Britain abandoned free trade and the gold standard. An era of government-created fiat money opened up, in which governments had to pursue an interventionist policy to manage their currency. With the financial crash of 1929 and the big slump in production that followed, a new government also came under pressure to intervene in the capitalist economy to try to get it expanding again. ‘Public works’ programmes were initiated, such as Roosevelt’s New Deal in the USA and Hitler’s rearmament in Germany. In his 1936 General Theory of Employment, Interest and Income the British economist John Maynard Keynes provided a theoretical justification for such ad-hoc schemes. He argued that left to itself – ‘laissez faire’ – capitalism would not necessarily recover from a slump of its own accord, as economists had preached till then, but that government intervention, in the form of a tax policy to stimulate demand was required. In the event of a boom, this could be prevented from ending in a slump, as booms had previously always done, by the government pursuing the opposite policy of using taxes to discourage consumption. Thanks to government intervention, steady capitalist expansion could be engineered. Naturally this theory, especially stimulating demand in a slump by redistributing purchasing power from the rich to the non-rich, was acclaimed by reformists as a justification for the reforms they already favoured. Those that had still regarded themselves as in the Marxist tradition abandoned Marx for Keynes.

Keynesianism was not consciously pursued as a government policy till the beginning of the Second World War. When that war was not followed by a slump, as the end of the First World War had been, but by a 25-year period of capitalist expansion with only minor ‘recessions’, many open supporters of capitalism hailed Keynes for having saved capitalism. But this was an illusion. Put to the test when the post-war boom came to an end in the 1970s, Keynesian policies resulted in what was called ‘stagflation’ – a rise in the general price level while the economy remained stagnant. The post-war boom had been caused by other factors such as reconstruction and the spontaneous expansion of internal and world markets.

Exit Keynes

The end of the post-war boom led to what was called a ‘fiscal crisis of the capitalist state’. Governments depended for what they spend on levying taxes, which ultimately fall on capitalist profits, and on borrowing money from those who have it. With less profit being made, there was less to tax and less to borrow. Government had no alternative but to cut their spending back or even increase it as Keynes had advocated they should do to get out of a slump. Another economic theory was required to replace Keynesianism and justify this. The new theory popularised by the American economist Milton Friedman, called itself ‘monetarism’ as it advocated a tight monetary policy, i.e. cutting government spending, and letting market forces revive the capitalist economy by restoring profitability of its own accord as asset prices and real wages fell. This was not really a new theory but a revival of pre-Keynesian economic liberalism.

There is some justification, then, for calling this replacement policy ‘neo-liberalism’. What is not justified is seeing its application as a free choice on the part the part the governments. It was something imposed on them by the workings of the capitalist economy, given the situation it was in. Governments had no choice but to apply it. In other words capitalism was the cause, with neo-liberalism merely the political and ideological justification.

What the capitalist conditions imposed was that governments should cut their spending or, rather, cut taxing power so that they had less to spend. With less to spend, ‘austerity’ was the order of the day in all countries irrespective of the political colour of their government. It was not just Reagan and Thatcher in the USA and Britain but also Mitterrand in France. Public services were cut back, ‘welfare’ and ‘benefits’ were slashed, especially for those who for one reason or another were not able to find a job. Since the economists preached that there was a so-called ‘natural rate of unemployment’, which could be as high as 6 percent, millions of already poor people had their standard of living reduced even further. Other reforms enacted during the post-war boom were whittled away or rolled back.

To reduce their borrowing, governments sold off state assets to private capitalist firms, who were granted the right to make profits from them in return for themselves raising the capital to finance them. As a policy of trying to ensure steady sustained capitalist development, neo-liberalism has been just as much a failure as Keynesianism was, as spectacularly shown by the Crash of 2008 and the Great Recession that followed. What this showed is that, no matter what policy governments adopt, capitalism goes relentlessly on its way, repeatedly going through the boom/slump cycle that it has done since the 1820s. The fact is that governments do not – cannot – control the way the capitalist economy works. It is the other way round. It is the operation of capitalism that constrains what governments can do; all they can do is a little more than react to what capitalism throws at them. There is a sense in which they do have a choice. They could choose to try to defy what capitalism’s economic forces dictate but, if they do, they will make matters worse. As Marx pointed out with regard to banking legislation, while governments cannot make things better, they can make things worse.

‘Ignorant and confused banking laws, such as those of 1844-5, may intensify the monetary crisis. But no bank legislation can abolish crises themselves’ (Capital, Volume 3, Chapter 30, Penguin Books edition, p.621).

This warning is apt because left-wing populists are calling for neo-liberalism to be replaced by government intervention to spend money to end austerity and get capitalism expanding again – a revival of Keynes’s discredited idea that could be called ‘neo-Keynesianism’. As Marxists know, both from the past experience of such attempts and from a knowledge of how capitalism works, this is doomed to fail and would make things worse.

It is not neo-liberalism that is the problem, but capitalism. It is not a change of policy that is required, but a change of socio-economic system.

ADAM BUICK

Keynes vs. Friedman

December 2019

15
Both stalwart classical liberals had, then, a deep scepticism when it came to democracy, and sought ways to restrict it. Matthew Goodwin, in another recent article in the Times (3 November) wrote: ‘Few British or American students are told to business interests. It is not in their interest to suggest that there is an alternative to the profit system. The public are not so easily duped, as shown by their dissatisfaction with capitalism above, as well as their scepticism with respect to the media. Melanie Phillips in an article in the Times (12 November) wrote: ‘Few British or American students are told about the evils of communism in the same way as they are told about the evils of Nazism.’ Few are taught that capitalism is the precondition for freedom and prosperity. It is hard to see a more ironic statement than an organ of propaganda claiming that freedom cannot exist without capitalism, and socialists are wrong because they do not allow freedom. George Orwell wrote in his essay ‘The Freedom of the Press’ (1944), ‘The English intelligentsia have plenty of reason for their timidity and dishonesty; indeed I know by heart the arguments by which they justify themselves. But at least let us have no more nonsense about defending liberty against Fascism. If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.’

Matthew Goodwin in another recent article in the Times (3 November), wrote of ‘angry, divisive populism that is eroding everything once considered essential to our culture of consensus.’ By this populism, he meant the ‘belief in a corrupt, self-serving and neglectful elite that undermines the interests of the ‘pure’ people. It doesn’t take much to work out why such a view is so quickly disparaged by the capitalist press. Indeed this ‘civic culture’ he extolled might be seen as a society in which the elite do as they will and those below are docile and humble enough to submit to this rule. Though, he isn’t stupid, and he knows that the public is not either. He knows that this view will resonate with voters, even though ‘Britain will drift further from the civic culture that was considered to be one of its most valuable features’. But ‘viable to whom? Clearly not valuable to the majority who are beginning to shake off the neoliberal denial of class altogether.

A genuine alternative is obviously needed. Discontent with the status quo is growing. Of course, the alternative is not, as the capitalist press have it, Jeremy ‘class war’ Corbyn, but socialism. Obviously, this is totally against the interests of the ruling class and therefore not something they want the public to hear. What are the majority then to do? Now seems an appropriate time to make the case for socialism and show that the poverty of many and greed of some is not the only way. The extension of democracy to all aspects of life, including work, is the foundation of socialism, and it is hard to think of something more apt to our times. The challenge is to overcome an anti-democratic media that seeks to restrict opinion and to keep the majority obedient.

PM SHAIH

...and the Liberal Democrats

A former Lib Dem member writes.

The enlightenment idea of liberalism is based on equality before the law, consent of the population, and on liberty. ‘Liberalism sought to replace the norms of hereditary privilege, state religion, absolute monarchy, the divine right of kings and traditional conservatism with representative democracy and the rule of law’ [Wikipedia]. The foremost exponent of liberalism historically is John Stuart Mill who was a British contemporary of Karl Marx. Mill rejected the labour theory of value of Karl Marx (and economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo) and the class struggle. The class struggle aspect was elucidated in our 1911 pamphlet ‘The Socialist Party versus the Liberal Party’ (www.worldsocialism.org/sa/pamphlet/should-working-class-support-liberal-party) where we also said ‘society today, with its rules and regulations, is shaped by those who are in possession of political power, and... Parliament. It is here the true crux of the situation lies. I see the control of political power means the control of society’.

The Liberal Democratic Party today adopts the mantle of liberalism. In theory party going is made democratically by conference, but in reality, by the Federal Policy Committee chaired by the leader. If that seems cynical, readers are invited to recall the Lib-Dem-Tory coalition government between 2010 and 2015 and their abandonment of their pledge to abolish student tuition fees. The Socialist Party is committed to hostility to all other political parties and the fullest democracy, and this is important because without it, bad ideas are made behind the backs of ordinary members. Expect the current Lib Dem leader Jo Swinson (who was former leader Nick Clegg’s Private Parliamentary Secretary and later a junior minister in the Coalition government), despite her denials, to politically trade principles for power too. We will not.

DIW

Jo Swinson, just another run-of-the-mill political opportunist
The fall of Rojava

A mid the horror of the Syrian civil war it had seemed that there would be no hope of peace in Syria. The north of Syria was dominated by Kurdish forces inspired by the political ideas of Kurdish militants, which were based on the idea of establishing a nation within a capitalist world system. Rojava’s principles would always take a secondary place to this.

SO SAID a bloke in a flat cap asking a lady a silly, dull question. What preparations could and should be made for nuclear war. It’s hard to know just how the police think that the bomb would drop which coloured the bomb would drop which coloured the sky, which then fell down as blackened rain. Flocks of birds were also caught in the blast, and hundreds of burning guillotines and gannets landed around the island. Later, the soldiers were sent to collect the bodies, which had formed a ‘floating crust’ washed up on the beach. The soldiers didn’t talk about what they had experienced: ‘it happened, and that was that’. The film ends by detailing the longer-term effects on the soldiers, such as cancer and infertility. One man thinks that not being able to have children might be the best, as other veterans’ sons and daughters had health problems linked to radiation poisoning. Unearthed documents show that the soldiers, whose children were being used as part of an experiment to see what effects the bomb would have on people.

It was this with information that governments through the Cold War years made preparations for how Britain would deal with a nuclear war. Any advance notice of nuclear war would have had ridiculously little good on paper would likely be worthwhile. The bomb dropped, would this just be a more upmarket coffin? As Murphy shows, any provisions which might have looked good on paper might actually have ridiculously little practical worth in a nuclear holocaust. One of the civil servants featured says that the plans were largely just to persuade people that what they were doing was a worthwhile exercise. The risks and dire consequences of nuclear weapons were downplayed by the authorities, both to the soldiers on Christmas Island and the people who would have to rely on makeshift shelters and local militias. The civil defence plans and the soldiers’ stories have in common a contempt for those lower down the social ladder from the government and senior military. Behind the threat of nuclear war, the class war was the real conflict taking place.

PROPER RESPONSE

You’ve Had It, Ain’t Ya?

A capitalist own goal

In July we drew attention to an article by George Monbiot in the Guardian (25 April) in which he announced that he had come to the conclusion that capitalism as such – as a profit-driven system geared to the endless accumulation of capital – and not any particular variety of capitalism, was the root cause of environmental damage. We were not the only ones to comment on this. For some, Monbiot’s statement was not based, as is Extinction Rebellion’s, on a recognition of the danger of making the Earth uninhabitable, but on resources eventually running out due to capitalism’s perspective to pursue endless growth. We have heard this argument before and as when in 1972 the Club of Rome predicted that the world would run out of oil by 1981, money and silver by 2021, copper, lead and natural gas by 2035 (https://www.hearthub.com/2011/09/great-moments-in-failed-predictions/). None of this has happened as a distinction between ‘exploitable’ and ‘natural’ resources and physical resources. The physical resources are there in the ground, but what under capitalism is exploitable depends on whether or not it is profitable, which in turn depends on the cost of extraction and the price that the particular resource can command on the market. As a resource becomes more difficult to extract and the paying demand for it continues, its price rises and it becomes profitable to extract it from places previously it wasn’t. Even if we imagine a scenario—contrary to reality—where humanity didn’t run into a crisis because of natural resource crunch, the best way to deal with the situation would be reliance on private property and market forces.

But academic economics argues in effect that there is, and always will be, a ‘natural resource crunch.’ Because human needs are (assumed) to be infinite, its textbooks teach that resources can never be enough to satisfy people’s needs and therefore they have to be rationed through ‘private property and market forces’ and people having to pay for what they need. In refuting Monbiot’s claim that if capitalism continues resources will eventually run out, Murphy is also refuting the basic tenet of economics textbooks. If only a ‘small fraction’ of resources in the ground are used – and so there is no ‘natural resource crunch’ – this means that ‘private property and market prices’ are not imposed by nature, but by capitalism. It means that capitalism threatens humanism in all sorts of ways, but this is not one of them.

So, Murphy marks a point against Monbiot but he goes on to score an own goal when he writes:

‘It was everything that could have dreamed of, nobody finding out anything at all about why were there. Between exploring the island and partying, the soldiers worked on building a runway and hangars. When they learned they were there to test nuclear weapons, they were told they weren’t in any danger. But through being on Christmas Island. The scientists and senior staff had been issued protective clothing and the indigenous people had been shipped out. The soldiers sat on the ground and waited, while loudspeakers played upbeat music. The bombs, a thousand times stronger than those used on Japan, were dropped from planes and exploded as few as 23 miles away from the camp. The flash seems to come through to the back of your head. You could see the bodies in your fingers through your teeth when we were alive in mind the light was not in front of you, it was behind you’. They were then ordered to watch the explosion, ‘like the creation of another mini planet, mini solar system thing’. The loudspeaker voice ordered them to find cover for when the ‘pressure wave’ blasted across the island. The bomb had sucked the sea up into the sky, which then fell down as blackened rain. Flocks of birds were also caught in the blast, and hundreds of burning guillotines and gannets landed around the island. Later, the soldiers were sent to collect the bodies, which had formed a ‘floating crust’ washed up on the beach. The soldiers didn’t talk about what they had experienced: ‘it happened, and that was that’. The film ends by detailing these longer-term effects on the soldiers, such as cancer and infertility. One man thinks that not being able to have children might be the best, as other veterans’ sons and daughters had health problems linked to radiation poisoning. Unearthed documents show that the soldiers, whose children were being used as part of an experiment to see what effects the bomb would have on people.

It was with this information that governments through the Cold War years made preparations for how Britain would cope with a nuclear attack, although ‘preparations’ is probably an overstatement. At the time, it was widely accepted that the recommendations of how we could ‘protect and survive’ would be woefully inadequate. Any advance notice of nuclear war would have been rough.3 Million smallish boxes distributed to community hubs around the country. These early warning systems would make nothing more than bleating noises, which would stop when the bombs were on their way. The one
Pointless Work

Socialist
Others, the less the worker is likely to be stress and anxiety, while more meaningful solve problems that should not really exist)

Themselves are of various kinds, including

Workers performing them, and he quotes requests for examples of bullshit jobs from email and other responses to his characterised as ‘shit jobs’.

37 per cent of workers felt that their job employee feels obliged to pretend that

Of the conditions of employment, the

So completely pointless, unnecessary, or

Much of Graeber’s evidence is taken free from one part of a city or town to

A long time ago.’ Indeed, and it would their lives. I believe we passed the point

Or service that people hadn’t thought of,

Preexisting need, or creates a product

Job is quoted as follows: ‘I consider a would otherwise be employed.

For medical insurance companies: in effect the free transport policy introduced in

The final chapter contains a proposal for a universal basic income, but the book’s interest lies in the earlier chapters, where a great deal is said about the reality for so many of employment under capitalism. One worker in a bullshit job is quoted as follows: ‘I consider a worthwhile job to be one that fulfils a preexisting need, or creates a product or service that people hadn’t thought of, that somehow enhances and improves their lives. I believe we passed the point where most jobs were these type of jobs a long time ago.’ Indeed, and it would be straightforward to make work more satisfying and to reduce working hours, while still producing enough to meet human need.

Free Transport

Since under capitalism most of

We will have to wait for Volume Three to see his analysis of the clearances in

In his introduction to this 700-page tome, Alwyn Edgar explains that he first became interested over fifty years ago in the Scottish Highlands and how they came to be depopulated but that now got round to turning his research and notes into a book. Four more volumes are follow.

In this volume he examines the origin and nature of the clan system as it existed up until 1750 and exposes some of the popular misconceptions about it, for instance that it was overpopulation that led to the later mass emigration from the area to the slums and industries of Glasgow and to North America and New Zealand and that the highlanders were Catholics (he produces figures to show that they were 96 percent Protestant). We will have to wait for Volume Three to

As the subtitle suggests, it is not the idea that people should be able to travel for free from one part of a city or town to another that is odd but that they should have to pay to do this. They wouldn’t have to work if they didn’t, but in a capitalised world of places this is not the case under capitalism either.

Fares-free public transport for all urban areas is a slogan that is often repeated, in ‘in as many as 97 cities and towns worldwide’ (56 in Europe, 27 in the US, 11 in Brazil, 2 in China and 1 in Australia). Partial free transport, where a section of the population such as pensioners can travel without paying has much more widespread

The book, made up of articles by various authors, covers the subject extensively, both past and present, and includes an element for travel to and from work in the wage they pay. In some small towns it has been a cost-saving exercise as, given the relatively small number of

Too

The authors approach the subject from an ideological point of view, seeing free transport not just as an answer to the pollution and congestion caused by private cars, but as a move towards a change of society, writing of ‘socio-ecological transformation’ and ‘decommodifying public transport’. However, whereas this has been introduced, this has been more for more pragmatic reasons. In the US the driving force has often been to ‘downsize’ businesses wanting to encourage customers to visit their stores. In France schemes are partly financed as a way for employers, who benefit from not having to include an element for travel to and from work in the wage they pay. In some small towns it has been a cost-saving exercise as, given the relatively small number of users, it has been possible to subsidise the service from local taxes than to erect a superstructure to charge and collect fares.

Free Public Transport and Why We Don’t Pay to Ride Escalators.


The psychologically motivated campaigns have often ended up negating free transport for all (let alone socialism) to a long-term aim and concentrating on obtaining political or parliamentary changes for disadvantaged groups as ‘transport justice’, clearly a reform to capitalism’s poor law system rather than a step towards a change of society. As reforms go, not having to pay for local public transport is unobjectionable, even of benefit to workers, but it’s not a step towards free access for all, although it does show that there is nothing unfeasible about this given the common ownership and democratic control of the means of life.

Highland Clearing


In this chapter we will look at the different ways of defining what a clan was, not only for legal or administrative purposes but also in terms of its own perception and the way it was understood by others. We will also look at the different ways of defining what a clan was, not only for legal or administrative purposes but also in terms of its own perception and the way it was understood by others.

The first half of the nineteenth-century

That they were 96 percent Protestant).

So what has happened to turn

We will have to wait for Volume Three to see his analysis of the clearances in the first half of the nineteenth-century by the Duke of Sutherland, notorious throughout the world thanks to Marx’s mention of them in chapter 27 of Capital on ‘The Exploitation of the Agricultural Population’ as an example of what was required to allow capitalist development to take off.

One useful way of looking at the Highlands is to think of it as a ‘frontier’, an area that was only partially settled and was seen as a place of opportunity for those who were willing to risk their lives. The Scottish Highlands were a place to have introduced it.

Alwynn Edgar

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Since under capitalism most of

We will have to wait for Volume Three to see his analysis of the clearances in the first half of the nineteenth-century by the Duke of Sutherland, notorious throughout the world thanks to Marx’s mention of them in chapter 27 of Capital on ‘The Exploitation of the Agricultural Population’ as an example of what was required to allow capitalist development to take off.

One useful way of looking at the Highlands is to think of it as a ‘frontier’, an area that was only partially settled and was seen as a place of opportunity for those who were willing to risk their lives. The Scottish Highlands were a place to have introduced it.

Alwynn Edgar

The authors approach the subject from an ideological point of view, seeing free transport not just as an answer to the pollution and congestion caused by private cars, but as a move towards a change of society, writing of ‘socio-ecological transformation’ and ‘decommodifying public transport’. However, whereas this has been introduced, this has been more for more pragmatic reasons. In the US the driving force has often been to ‘downsize’ businesses wanting to encourage customers to visit their stores. In France schemes are partly financed as a way for employers, who benefit from not having to include an element for travel to and from work in the wage they pay. In some small towns it has been a cost-saving exercise as, given the relatively small number of users, it has been possible to subsidise the service from local taxes than to erect a superstructure to charge and collect fares.

Since under capitalism most of
Hippies: An abolition of Socialist Understanding

Ever since the explosion of “Flower Power” in Summer 67, the world’s working-class has been aware of the Hippie movement, or as it is now more frequently called, “The Underground”. Attitudes to the hippies have varied from amused fascination to angry revulsion. Many people have grown more hostile to them over the past two years, as their emphasis on such harmless-sounding words as “Love” and “Beautiful People” has declined, and their tendency to smoke pot has become more widely publicised. In Britain the occupation of 144 Piccadilly confirmed the hippy manifesto; no one can specify who is a hippy and who isn’t. It is vaguely defined, fuzzy-edged—no one can draw up a hippy manifesto; no one can specify who is a hippy and who isn’t. (Socialist Standard, December 1969)

Meetings:

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<th>DECEMBER 2019</th>
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<tr>
<td>MAIDSTON Sunday 3 December, 2.00 p.m. Kent and Sussex Regional Branch meeting Venue: The Muggleton Inn (Wetherspoon), 8 High Street, Maidstone, ME14 1 HJ (first floor) Please note that this meeting is a week earlier than usual in December</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOLTON Friday 13 December, 8.30 p.m. Manchester Branch Social Venue: Sweet Green Tavern, 127 Crook Street, Bolton, BL3 6DD</td>
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<th>JANUARY 2020</th>
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<tr>
<td>CARDIFF Every Saturday (weather permitting), 1.00 p.m. ~ 3.00 p.m. Street Stall Venue: Queen Street (Newport Road end), Cardiff, CF10 2HQ</td>
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Declaration of Principles

This declaration is the basis of our organisation and, because it is also an important historical document dating from the formation of the party in 1904, its original language has been retained.

Object

The establishment of a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments of producing and distributing wealth and by and in the interest of the whole community.

Declaration of Principles

The Socialist Party of Great Britain holds

1. That society as at present constituted is based upon the ownership of the means of living (i.e. land, factories, railways, etc.) by the capitalists or master class, and the consequent enslavement of the working class, by whose labour alone wealth is produced.

2. That in society, therefore, there is an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a class struggle between those who possess but do not produce and those who produce but do not possess.

3. That this antagonism can be abolished only by the emancipation of the working class from the domination of the master class, by the conversion into the common property of society of the means of production and distribution, and their democratic control by the whole people.

4. That as in the order of social evolution the working class is the last class to achieve its freedom, the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind, without distinction of race or sex.

5. That this emancipation must be the work of the working class itself.

6. That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organize consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local, in order that this machinery, including these forces, may be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege, aristocratic and plutocratic.

7. That as all political parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the working class is diametrically opposed to the interests of all sections of the master class, the party seeking working class emancipation must be hostile to every other party.

8. The Socialist Party of Great Britain, therefore, enters the field of political action determined to wage war against all other political parties, whether alleged labour or avowedly capitalist, and calls upon the members of the working class of this country to muster under its banner to the end that a speedy termination may be wrought to the system which deprives them of the fruits of their labour, and that poverty may give place to comfort, privilege to equality, and slavery to freedom.
‘A spectre is haunting Europe - the spectre of Communism.’

This is the famous opening sentence of The Manifesto of the Communist Party by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The original Manifesto of 1848 listed some progressive reforms, but ceased advocating them by 1872. The measures ranging from nationalisation to a heavy progressive or graduated income tax – may have had merit in 1848 but not today. Indeed, Marx and Engels in their joint preface to the 1872 edition stated: ‘No special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of Section II. That passage would, in many respects, be differently worded today.’ Yet this does not stop our opponents, particularly on the Right, from resurrecting ideas, long dead and buried, to besmirch socialism/communism. The Mises Institute, for example, has used them to suggest that socialism is to blame for the suffering of our class in state capitalist Venezuela.

More recently in an article titled ‘How the Presidential candidates rehash failed communist ideas’ (thedianbely.com, 15 October), Joe Jarvis writes ‘Marx would fit right in running for President amongst the current crowded field of “democratic socialists” clamoring to one-up each other with the most communist platform. For instance, Bernie Sanders’ platform includes a top estate tax–aka inheritance or death tax–of 77%.’ Later, for good measure, he adds the failings of Bolsheviks and state capitalist China to the mix. Pure nonsense of course because, as Rosa Luxemburg said succinctly, ‘without the conscious will and action of the majority of the proletariat, there can be no Socialism.

‘Social democracy is nothing but a stinking corpse’

This is Rosa Luxemburg again, in a speech to the founding conference of the KPD (German Communist Party). This, like Marx and Engels’ spectre, was rather premature. Even Jarvis in his article notes: ‘This list included things like free public education, a progressive income tax, and a state-owned central banking monopoly. That’s all been accomplished of course.’ Socialists acknowledge that certain reforms won by our class have helped to improve general living and working conditions. Examples are to be found in fields such as education, housing, child employment, work conditions and social security. However, such ‘successes’ have in reality done little more than keep workers and their families functioning as the fundamental relationship between worker and capitalist remains unchanged. ‘Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him’ (Karl Marx, Capital, Chapter 10, The Working Day). The reforms which today’s Social Democrats and others pursue will not end war (‘Americans want an end to forever wars. But that’s not what Trump offers’ (theguardian.com, 18 October) and poverty (‘Essex lorry deaths: All 39 migrants found dead were Vietnamese nationals, police say’, mirror.co.uk, 1 November).

Gravediggers unite!

The Communist Manifesto: ‘What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. ’Don’t despair! One Dr. Rogers, researching into early societies, was once quoted in the Guardian (17 December, 1980) as saying: ‘I do not think aggression is innate. I think aggression is something that man learns. Aggression comes as soon as you get possessions’. More recently (29 October, 2017) in the same paper there is a fascinating report on the Ju’hoansi people of the Kalahari. ‘They have always been fiercely egalitarian. They hate inequality or showing off, and shun formal leadership institutions. It’s what made them part of the most successful, sustainable civilisation in human history.’ ‘The internet was brought about by widespread voluntary cooperation, open standards and freely-produced software. Capitalism only made it unbearable and unusable with pop-up ads, overlay ads, full-page ads, provided ads, autoplay videos, firewalls, data regulatory and malware’ (@OfficialSPGB, 31 October). We also agree with author Arundhati Roy that ‘Flags are bits of colored cloth that governments use first to shrink-wrap people’s minds and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead’ (socialist-courier.blogspot.com, 2 November).

Learning from the dead

Socialism, as originally expressed by the followers of Robert Owen, appeared for the first time in their Co-operative Magazine of November 1827 and meant common ownership (not nationalisation or state capitalism). Later, in 1875, at the first meeting of the German Social Democratic Party, Eduard Bernstein and others claimed that capitalism could be reformed to meet working class interests. By championing gradual, ethically-inspired reforms they rejected socialism’s revolutionary and materialist foundations and paved the way for the likes of the UK Labour Party.