

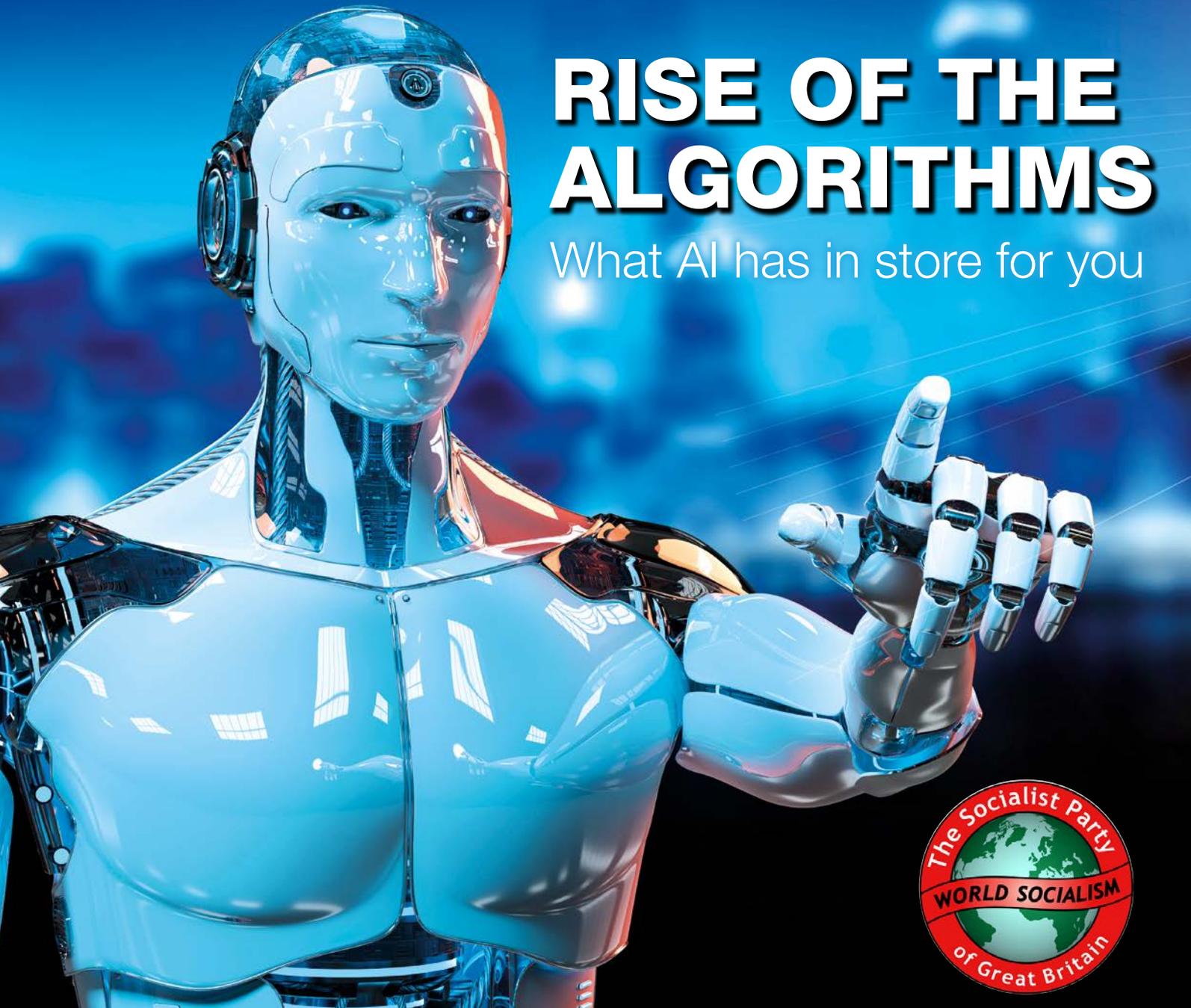
THE

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SOCIALIST STANDARD

Journal of The Socialist Party of Great Britain

Companion Party of the World Socialist Movement



RISE OF THE ALGORITHMS

What AI has in store for you



Also: AI: The last invention we ever need to make...
Whose side are we on?

Saving what's Left: Mélenchon bucks the trend?
AI – It's your move



Features

Whose side are we on? 5

Saving what's Left: Mélenchon
bucks the trend? 10

Artificial Intelligence 12

AI – It's your move 14

The economics of AI 16

Stuart Russell's 2021 Reith
Lectures on Living with Artificial
Intelligence..... 17

The long and the short of it ... 18

Party News 22

Regulars

Editorial 3

Pathfinders 4

Cooking the Books 6

Bird's Eye View 7

Material World 9

Cooking the Books II 17

Proper Gander 19

Reviews 20

50 Years Ago 22

Meetings 23

Life & Times 24

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Introducing the Socialist Party

The Socialist Party advocates a society where production is freed from the artificial constraints of profit and organised for the benefit of all on the basis of material abundance. It does not have policies to ameliorate aspects of the existing social system. It is opposed to all war.

The *Socialist Standard* is the combative monthly journal of the Socialist Party, published without interruption since 1904. In the 1930s the *Socialist Standard* explained why capitalism would not collapse of its own accord, in response to widespread claims to the contrary, and continues to hold this view in face of the notion's recent popularity. Beveridge's welfare measures of the 1940s were viewed as a reorganisation of poverty and a necessary 'expense' of production, and Keynesian policies designed to overcome slumps an illusion. Today, the journal exposes as false the view that banks create money out of thin



air, and explains why actions to prevent the depredation of the natural world can have limited effect and run counter to the nature of capitalism itself.

Gradualist reformers like the Labour Party believed that capitalism could be transformed through a series of social measures, but have merely become routine managers of the system. The Bolsheviks

had to be content with developing Russian capitalism under a one-party dictatorship. Both failures have given socialism a quite different-- and unattractive-- meaning: state ownership and control. As the *Socialist Standard* pointed out before both courses were followed, the results would more properly be called state capitalism.

The Socialist Party and the World Socialist Movement affirm that capitalism is incapable of meaningful change in the interests of the majority; that the basis of exploitation is the wages/money system. The *Socialist Standard* is proud to have kept alive the original idea of what socialism is-- a classless, stateless, wageless, moneyless society or, defined positively, a democracy in which free and equal men and women co-operate to produce the things they need to live and enjoy life, to which they have free access in accordance with the principle 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'

Queen Capital's jubilee

CAPITALISM, as we have pointed out many times, is a class-divided society, where there is a capitalist class who own the means of production and derive their wealth from the working class, who own no or little property and are forced to work for a wage or salary. Huge disparities in wealth and income between the two classes are the inevitable outcome. In the UK, the most visible manifestation of this class divide is the royal family, who sit at the apex of the class system. They own large palaces and tracts of land around the country and enjoy luxurious lifestyles, whereas workers live a more frugal existence and have to live in more modest dwellings, in many cases slum housing.

This month the state is holding the queen's platinum jubilee, celebrating that the monarch has been 70 years on the throne. Showy events, naff TV programmes and local street parties will inevitably be organised. This occasion is an opportunity to reinforce the idea that privilege and hierarchy are part of the natural order of things and to encourage deference among workers towards their

superiors. It will also be a festival of nationalism and patriotism, so whether you are a worker struggling on low pay or benefits or you are a billionaire, you can take pride in your great British 'heritage'.

These celebrations are coming at a time when workers are facing the biggest cost of living crisis for decades. There are royalist supporters who would argue that people need to be cheered up in these hard times. No doubt, a worker who is facing a choice between eating or heating their home will be thrilled to watch some sycophantic arselicker on the television droning on about how wonderful the queen and her family are. The capitalist state has graciously allowed the workers an extra day off from their daily toil. How very generous.

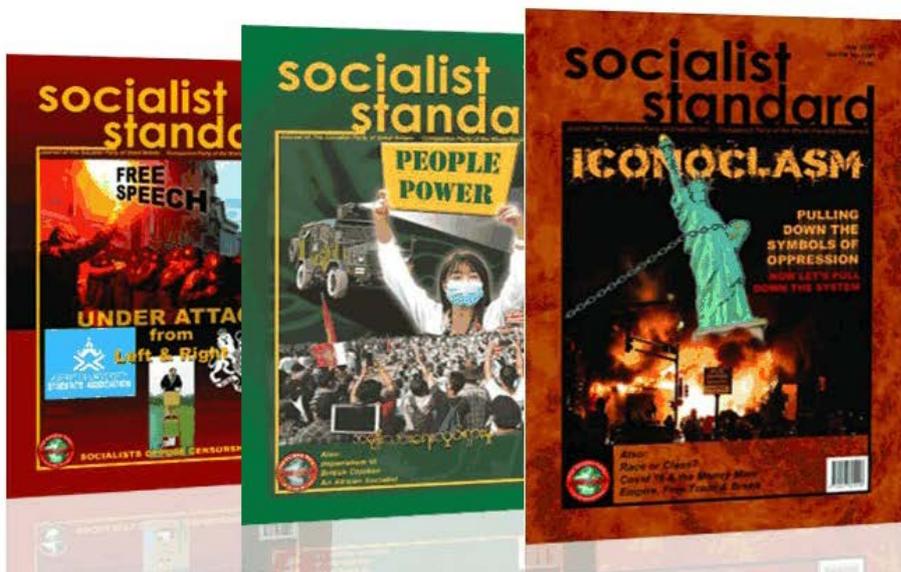
Some opponents of royalty, including some on the left, complain that the royal family leeches off the taxpayers and that they should be made to pay their fair share of tax. This misses the point somewhat as the tax burden falls on the capitalist class, not the working class. The royals derive their wealth and privileges not from any

tax advantages but, as with the rest of the capitalist class, from the surplus value created by the working class.

Some groups, like Republic, advocate the replacement of the monarchy with an elected head of state. This would make no material difference to the lives of workers, as the basis of capitalist society, with its pursuit of profit and exploitation of labour, would remain unchanged. We can see this clearly in countries that do have an elected head of state. In France for example, there have been strikes by public sector workers and protests by the gilets jaunes movement and in the USA there has been industrial action among the Walmart workers. In both countries, poverty exists alongside riches, as in the UK.

So the solution is not merely abolishing the royal family, but the economic system upon which their power and privileges are based. A system that exploits and oppresses workers and is responsible for the climate crisis. We argue that the world's workers need to organise democratically to replace it with socialism, a world of free access and common ownership. Anyway- enjoy your extra day off.

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AI: the last invention we ever need to make...

IN THIS issue we spotlight the rise and rise of Artificial Intelligence, a hot topic that raises fundamental questions about how it should be used, and what happens if it develops in ways we don't expect and don't want.

Currently AI is strictly horses for courses, confined within rule-based parameters and master of just one thing at a time, rather than becoming a super-jack of all trades. So, like numerical engines before the era of programmable general-purpose computing, it has been of limited use. But artificial general intelligence (AGI) is without doubt the ultimate goal, and the race is on to achieve it.

With this in mind, and with a chequered history of failed AI winters behind them

With this in mind, and with a chequered history of failed AI winters behind them, developers are concentrating on the 'can we do it?' question rather than the bigger 'should we do it?' question. Even less ethically distracted are investors whose only question is 'can we make money out of it?' This is not encouraging, given capitalism's track record.

One problem with AI is that the more advanced it gets, the less we understand it. AI is increasingly a 'black-box' phenomenon, whose inner workings are a mystery to us and whose results are often inexplicable and unverifiable by other means. We can't just treat it like a Delphic oracle, because it's already clocked up embarrassing gaffes such as building racism and sexism into its staff-hiring rationales, or factorising income instead of health conditions into its medical outcomes estimates. And there have been several public relations disasters, with AIs answering enquiries with profanities after reading the online Urban Dictionary, Facebook chatbots creepily inventing their own language that no human can understand, and Amazon's Alexa laughing demonically at its own joke: 'Why did the chicken cross the road? Answer- because humans are a fragile species who have no idea what's coming next' (<https://bit.ly/3wd4vh6>).

Then there is the lack of internationally agreed definitions, paradigms and developmental standards, in the absence of which each developer is left to make up their own rules. Can we expect global agreement when we can't get states to agree on climate change? In the absence of such a framework, it's no wonder that people fear the worst.

Frankenstein-anxiety is nothing new in the history of technology, of course, and if we banned every advance that might go wrong we would never have stopped wearing animal skins and woad. It's uncontroversial to say that the possible advantages to capitalism are huge, and indeed we're already seeing AI in everything from YouTube preference algorithms to self-drive tractors and military drone swarms. And that's small potatoes next to the quest for the holy grail of AGI. But while all this promises big profits for capitalists, what are the pros and cons in human terms? What is the long-term effect of the automation of work, for example? Tech pundits including Tesla boss Elon Musk take it for granted that most of us will have no jobs and that the only solution is a Universal Basic Income, a solution we argue is unworkable.

That's not the worst of it. In 1950 Alan Turing wrote, '[T]he machine thinking method [...] would not take long to outstrip our feeble powers. At some stage therefore we should have to expect the machines to take control'. IJ Good, Turing's colleague at Bletchley Park, helpfully added, 'The first ultra-intelligent machine is the last invention that man need ever make, provided that the machine is docile enough to tell us how to keep it under control' (<https://bit.ly/3FNCEkb>). The last thing we ever need, or the last thing we ever do, this side of a Singularity that wipes humans from the Earth?

It's not so much a question of a Terminator-style Armageddon with machines bent on our annihilation. Even in capitalism it's hard to imagine anyone investing in developing such a capability, at least not on purpose. But the fear is that it could happen by accident, as in the proposed 'paperclip apocalypse', in which a poorly considered instruction to make as many paperclips as possible results in the AI dutifully embarking on the

destruction of the entire globe in order to turn everything into paperclips. Musk has similarly argued that AI does not have to be evil to destroy humanity: 'It's just like, if we're building a road and an anthill just happens to be in the way, we don't hate ants, we're just building a road, and so, goodbye anthill' (cnb.cx/3yJ7pMI).

Stuart Russell, in his excellent 2021 Reith lectures on AI (see the summary on page 18), makes a telling observation about capitalist corporations like the fossil fuel industry, arguing that they operate as uncontrolled superintelligent AIs with fixed objectives which ignore externalities. But why only certain industries? We would go one further and argue that capitalism as a whole works like this. It doesn't hate humans or the planet, but is currently destroying both in the blind and disinterested quest to build ever greater profits, so goodbye world, to paraphrase its richest beneficiary, one Elon Musk.

Musk is right about one thing, saying 'the least scary future I can think of is one where we have at least democratized AI because if one company or small group of people manages to develop godlike digital superintelligence, they could take over the world'. It's rather ironic that, once again, Musk sees himself as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

To democratise AI you would first need to democratise social production, because in capitalism science and tech are sequestered behind barriers of ownership by private investors anxious to avoid any uncontrolled release of potentially profitable knowledge into the environment. AI needs to belong to all humanity, just like all other forms of wealth, which is why socialists advocate post-capitalist common ownership. In such circumstances, a global standardisation of AI development rules becomes genuinely feasible, and as Russell argues, it wouldn't be that difficult to program AIs not to kill us all in the quest for more paperclips: you simply build in an uncertainty principle, so that the AI understands that the solution it has devised may not be the one humans really want or need. It's a sensible approach. In fact if humans use it too, they'll realise that capitalism is not the solution they really want or need.

PJS

Whose side are we on?

WE HAVE been following opinion pieces and subsequent heated correspondence as responses to the war in Ukraine through the online columns of left wing/supposedly socialist publications. As schismatic as ever, the authors adopt a political redoubt firmly buttressed by their personal interpretations founded on Leninist thinking.

In essence there are two positions with a wide variety of nuances. One is that Ukraine is being subjected to nationalist, possibly imperialist, aggression by Russia. The invasion and indiscriminate shelling and bombing of Ukrainian cities is damning evidence of this.

The counter-argument appears to be that by allowing itself to become a proxy for NATO's anti-Russian imperialist ambitions, Ukraine has become subject to an essentially defensive Russian response. Claims of Nazi influence in the Ukrainian state are based on references to the Azov Battalion. The Azov Battalion does sport the Wolfsangel insignia, previously adopted by divisions of the Waffen-SS. In June 2014 the battalion (re)captured Mariupol from pro-Russian separatists and actual Russian forces. There lies the justification the Russian state employs.

Those adopting a sympathetic view of the Russian position, even if condemning the brutality of its methods, insist the real cause is provocation by NATO. Certainly, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO has indeed closed in around Russia's borders, which to an extent explains a response of sorts, without in any way justifying it.

The media, as ever in such bellicose situations, simplifies the cause as being the unreasoned, even lunatic, ambitions of one man. Single-handedly he brings his nation into armed confrontation with the essentially peaceable alliance that only desires international security.

This, arguably, is the Hitler fallacy. Firstly, identify the dictator – Saddam Hussain/ Vladimir Putin – make references to the former German Führer and Nazis, then launch an actual or proxy military response to bring him down. In 1914, it had been the Kaiser.

The moral high ground adopted by the USA, Britain et al, justifying the supply of armaments to Ukraine requires political amnesia. It is less than 20 years since these paragons of virtue were launching bombardments of Iraqi cities with the inevitably high death toll of civilians.

The reality is that war is organised slaughter, surgical strikes are a lie and collateral damage is the premeditated killing of children, amongst so many

other non-combatants. It is competitive capitalism in its bloodiest garb.

Those on the other side who seek to justify Russian action to a greater or lesser extent resort to the largely ad-hominem argument of guilt by association. If you don't lend support, even qualified support, to Russia then you are, by default, somehow supporting NATO. This remains so even if you condemn both sides.

NATO is the imperialist tool of the world hegemon, the USA, so those who resist it are by definition anti-imperialist and require understanding at least, not condemnation, or so goes the argument. Those who position themselves on the left, but condemn Russia, are supposedly social-imperialists.

Taking an active pro-Ukraine stance against Russian aggression is to become a perhaps unwary ally of a virulent nationalism. The history of nationalism around Russia, Ukraine, Poland and other neighbouring states is murky and bleak.

Present borders have been drawn by the forming and reforming of states throughout the twentieth century. The conflict between the state capitalism created by the Russian revolution and the more laissez-faire version (with varying levels of state involvement) in the West has been the driver of these reformations.

The present war in Ukraine is another episode in the on-going rivalry between capitalist formations. Wars are usually portrayed as discrete and almost self-contained between set dates: World War One 1914 to 1918, World War Two 1939 to 1945, Cold War (with hotspots) 1945 to 1989/90-ish.

Just as the Hundred Years War was not a continuous battle, but a series of armed encounters, so there is one protracted dissonance endemic to capitalism caused by competition. It is a feature of capitalism in its ceaseless pursuit of profit. It cannot be otherwise for as long as capitalism exists.

Supporting one side or another, however critically, is actually only selecting which capitalist formation to favour. In the Hundred Years War, choosing either France or England would have done nothing to change the underlying feudal order, only which king sits on the throne.

In all the articles we have read that employed a great deal of polemical invective, there have been very few references to the working class. Those who self-identify as socialists must surely come to recognise that no nation, or group of nations, acts, or can act in the interests of the working class. Workers' role, as ever,

is that great capitalist tradition of being cannon fodder, with civilians as mere collateral subject to damage.

To say otherwise is a non-sequitur, like asking which is most beneficial for the working class, Ford or Nissan? Nationalism, however it expresses itself, is inimical to the interests of the working class. Even when paused between armed conflicts, nations only value peace while it is profitable.

The tragedy of Ukraine is that workers have again been drawn into killing each other at the behest of others, those few who profit. In Britain the Ukrainian flag is being commonly flown. There is an understandable sympathy for those under near incessant bombardment, and exemplary generosity in trying to help refugees from the battlegrounds.

The irony is that while national flags continue to fly war will be perpetuated. Until workers generally look beyond the heart-rending media portrayals of the present war to see that it is virtually identical to all the other news coverage of war wherever it happens, whoever is involved, then even if this conflict is resolved, that's only another pause before the next one.

Anyone who doubts that capitalism is the root cause of war should consider that every bullet and shard of shrapnel, and the weapons that fired them, are commodities like baked beans, hybrid cars or movies on Netflix, manufactured and supplied for profit.

While well-meaning people organise coffee mornings and collections to raise a few hundred pounds to help desperate refugees fleeing the conflict, munitions manufacturers are making billions from creating the conditions people are trying to escape from, killing those who don't or can't run.

Whose side are we on? The side of the vast majority of people, the ones who create the world's wealth only for a significant proportion of it to be destroyed killing those self-same workers. The side not to be taken is either one of the combatants.

A worldwide truly democratic and leaderless society based on meeting people's needs and collaborative working is the only way the surely common aspiration for peace can be realised. The working class needs to harness its sympathy and efforts on behalf of those enduring the privations of war and transform them into focused action to vanquish capitalism. Then the competition, that all too readily becomes armed competition, can be replaced with co-operation.

DAVE ALTON

Is Russia imperialist?

IT CERTAINLY used to be. As the so-called USSR, Russia had an empire that included large parts of Europe and Central Asia. With its defeat in the Cold War, Russia lost not only its empire in Europe but, when the USSR self-destructed, its empire in Central Asia too. However, the fact that Russia no longer has an empire does not mean that it no longer harbours expansionist ambitions.

According to leaflets handed out by assorted 'Tankies', Maoists and Trotskyists in London on May Day, Russia is not an imperialist country. But that's because they adhere to Lenin's particular theory of imperialism.

In his 1920 Preface to the French and German editions of his 1917 pamphlet, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Lenin writes:

'Capitalism has grown into a world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the population of the world by a handful of "advanced" countries. And this "booty" is shared between two or three powerful world plunderers armed to the teeth (America, Great Britain, Japan)...'

His theory, one of the leaflets explained, treats 'imperialism as a global phenomenon of the leading capitalist

powers whose great financial houses, allied to their transnational corporations, seek to dominate, exploit, and rob the whole planet. The imperialist powers exploit not only their own working class but the working class in the semi colonies of the global south, bankrupting their industries and reducing their economies to suppliers of raw materials and primary products to the metropolitan markets. The booty thus won is used to buy off an aristocracy of labour via the trade union bureaucracy...'

However, 'Neither Russia nor China are imperialist powers, they are not integrated into the IMF and World Bank and cannot extract surplus value from the global south in that way, even if China in particular aspires to do so' (*Socialist Fight*).

Another leaflet openly concedes that, nevertheless, Russia is capitalist:

'Although Russia has been a capitalist state since 1991 it is not an imperialist power in its own right... Russia is not part of the "imperialist club" but a relatively backward, dependent capitalist economy.'

So, on this theory, the world is divided into 'imperialist' capitalist states, 'non-imperialist' capitalist states and the semi-colonial global South. The first make super-profits from exploiting the last while the non-imperialist capitalist states only make average profits because they are not in a

position to exploit the global South, only their own working class.

Where this rather tortuous argumentation is leading to is a justification for supporting Russia in its current war with NATO and Ukraine. 'Imperialist hands off Russia!', 'For the right of Russia to defend itself against imperialist encroachment!', the leaflets proclaim.

Besides being a flagrant departure from the socialist position that there is nothing at stake in wars between capitalist states justifying the loss of a single drop of working class blood, this also has the perverse result of justifying supporting Germany in WW2 since it too was a capitalist state that did not then directly benefit from colonial plunder (even if it aspired to), was excluded from the international payments system (then based on gold), and was surrounded by hostile imperialist states.

Imperialism, in the sense of capitalist states struggling amongst each other to acquire, keep and control sources of raw materials, trade routes, investment outlets and markets with the strongest in military terms doing best, is not an entirely misleading concept, but it is a product of capitalism. It doesn't make sense to divide capitalist states into 'imperialist' and 'non-imperialist' – and even less to take the side of the weaker against the strongest – as all of them are involved in the game.

The richest 10% of people own more than 80% of global wealth, and the 10 richest men have six times more wealth than that of the poorest 3.1 billion people combined. These vast inequalities in wealth reflect how society is split into two classes: the capitalist class who get their wealth through owning industries and corporations, and the working class who rely on wages or benefits to buy what is needed.

The Socialist Party's weekend of talks and discussion looks at why capitalism is divided into classes and how the antagonism between them impacts on the way we live. What is 'class consciousness' and how does it develop? To what extent is it meaningful to say that there is a middle class? What classes were there before capitalism, in previous stages of history? And what could a future classless society be like?

Full residential cost (including accommodation and meals Friday evening to Sunday afternoon) is £100; the concessionary rate is £50. Book online at www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/summer-school-2022/ or send a cheque (payable to the Socialist Party of Great Britain) with your contact details to Summer School, The Socialist Party, 52 Clapham High Street, London, SW4 7UN. Day visitors are welcome, but please book by e-mail in advance. E-mail enquiries to spgbschool@yahoo.co.uk.

THE CLASS DIVIDE

The Socialist Party's Summer School

19th - 21st August 2022

Fircroft College, Birmingham

Memory hole

Credit: DMITRY FEOKTISTOV / TASS



'The Russian Education Ministry has announced plans that will require children as young as seven to study history, as part of a wider push to promote "patriotic" education amid the war in Ukraine. "Historical education will begin in schools from the first grade," Education Minister Sergei Kravtsov said at the opening of an exhibition called *Everyday Nazism* which is due to be shown at a nationwide schools forum, *The Power is in the Truth*. "[In our teaching of history], we will never allow it [to be written] that we somehow treated other nations – our fraternal nations of Ukraine and Belarus – poorly. We will do everything in our power so that historical memory is preserved." The plans will lower the age of children taking compulsory history lessons by three years, and will see historical education incorporated into existing parts of the school curriculum. Kravtsov also said that from Sept. 1, schools will start each week by singing the Russian national anthem and raising the Russian flag' (themoscowtimes.com, 19 April, bit.ly/3Oretm3).

As George Orwell warned, those who control the past can control the present. Putin long ago joined the ranks of dictators for whom 'yesterday's weather can be changed by decree' — a power Orwell attributed in 1942 to Franco, Hitler and Stalin. If an event in the past is no longer regarded as useful to the authorities all reference to it is destroyed. A people who cannot remember where they used to be are in no position to challenge where they are now. Historically controlled, the present is something that workers come to accept as an unquestionable normality. Orwell was not merely inventing nightmares. In Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia the deletion from the record of history of disruptive facts was a carefully organised campaign.

Doublethink

'Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce... Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under

circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living' (The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Karl Marx, 1852, bit.ly/3KcVZCm).

Mazda Majidi and Derek Ford 's recent article titled 'Clarifying and inspiring revolution for 130 years: Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme*' (hamptonthink.org, 2 April, bit.ly/3xHjVLz) is both tragic and farcical. The Gotha programme was drawn up to unite the two sections of the German working class movement, the *General Association of German Workers*, and the *Social Democratic Workers' Party*. They combined to form the *Socialist Workers' Party* of Germany at the Gotha Congress in 1875. The *Critique of the Gotha Programme* consisted of marginal comments made by Marx on the draft of this party programme. The *Critique* remains popular among those who worship certain dead dictators or their modern counterparts because Marx refers to a transitional period between capitalism and communism (socialism) and to another between an early and a later stage of communism during which there will not be full distribution according to needs. As the authors remark, the '...Critique was a key resource for Lenin's study and publication of *The State and Revolution*. Lenin expanded on the transition between the first and second stages of communism and justified the dictatorship of the proletariat.' But as Marx notes in *Critique* just after dealing with the transitional period '... to force on our Party again, as dogmas, ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but now have become obsolete verbal rubbish' (bit.ly/38nKn2s) seems apt for other notions which we would do well throw in the dustbin of history and are found aplenty, alas, on www.hamptonthink.org, including imperialism, Marxism-Leninism, national liberation, socialism with Chinese, Cuban, etc characteristics, and workers' states.



Credit: Getty Images

Big Brother

'Future society will be socialist society. This also means that with the abolition of exploitation, commodity production and buying and selling will also be abolished and, therefore, there will be no room for buyers and sellers of labour power, for employers and employed—there will be only free workers... Where there are no classes, where there are neither rich nor poor, there is no need for a state, there is no need also for political power, which oppresses the poor and protects the rich. Consequently, in socialist society there will be no need for the existence of political power' (Anarchism or Socialism? 1906, bit.ly/3MqEIHv).

Ironically, the author of this piece would thirty years later, in a complete volte-face, declare the USSR to be socialist. That same year, on the 28th August, *Pravda* proclaimed him divine: 'O Great Stalin, O Leader of the Peoples, Thou who didst give birth to man, Thou who didst make fertile the earth, Thou who dost rejuvenate the Centuries, Thou who givest blossom to the spring...' And a mere mortal observed:

'There are in the USSR privileged and exploited classes, dominant classes and subject classes. Between them the standard of living is sharply separated. The classes of travel on the railways correspond exactly to the social classes; similarly with ships, restaurants, theatres, shops, and with houses; for one group palaces in pleasant neighbourhoods, for the others wooden barracks alongside tool stores and oily machines... It is always the same people who live in the palaces and the same people who live in the barracks. There is no longer private property, there is only one property — State property. But the State no more represents the whole community than under preceding régimes' (What the Russian Revolution Has Become, Robert Guiheneuf, 1936).

And today, 'Russian elites and oligarchs are probably some of the best in the world at hiding their wealth...' (washingtonpost.com, 11 April, wapo.st/37FL9aT).

UK BRANCHES & CONTACTS

Some meetings are online.

See page 23.

LONDON

North London branch. Meets 3rd Thurs. 8pm at Torriano Meeting House, 99 Torriano Ave, NW5 2RX. Contact: Chris Dufton 020 7609 0983 nlb.spgb@gmail.com

South & West London branch. Meets last Saturday in month, 2.00pm. Head Office, 52 Clapham High St, SW4 7UN. Contact: 020 7622 3811. spgb@worldsocialism.org

MIDLANDS

West Midlands regional branch. Meets last Sat. 3pm (check before attending). Contact: Stephen Shapton. 01543 821180. Email: stephenshapton@yahoo.co.uk.

NORTH

North East Regional branch.

Contact: P. Kilgallon, c/o Head Office, 52 Clapham High Street, SW4 7UN.

Lancaster branch. Meets 3rd Mon, 3pm, Friends Meeting House, Meeting House Lane. Ring to confirm: P. Shannon, 07510 412 261, spgb.lancaster@worldsocialism.org.

Manchester branch. Contact: Paul Bennett, 6 Burleigh Mews, Hardy Lane, M21 7LB. 0161 860 7189.

Bolton. Contact: H. McLaughlin. 01204 844589.

Cumbria. Contact: Brendan Cummings, 19 Queen St, Millom, Cumbria LA18 4BG.

Doncaster. Contact: Fredi Edwards, fredi.edwards@hotmail.co.uk

SOUTH/SOUTHEAST/SOUTHWEST

Kent and Sussex regional branch. Meets 2nd Sun. 2pm at The Muggleton Inn, High Street, Maidstone ME14 1HJ. Contact: spgb.ksr@worldsocialism.org.

South West regional branch. Meets 3rd Sat. 2pm at the Railway Tavern, 131 South Western Road, Salisbury SP2 7RR.

Contact: Stephen Harper spgbsw@gmail.com

Brighton. Contact: Anton Pruden, anton@pruden.me

Canterbury. Contact: Rob Cox, 4 Stanhope Road, Deal, Kent, CT14 6AB.

Luton. Contact: Nick White, 59 Heywood Drive, LU2 7LP.

Cornwall. Contact: Harry Sowden, 16 Polgine Lane, Troon, Camborne, TR14 9DY. 01209 611820.

East Anglia. Contact: David Porter, Eastholme, Bush Drive, Eccles-on-Sea, NR12 0SF. 01692 582533. Richard Headicar, 42 Woodcote, Firs Rd, Hethersett, NR9 3JD. 01603 814343.

Essex. Contact: Pat Deutz, 11 The Links, Billericay, CM12 0EX. patdeutz@gmail.com.

Cambridge. Contact: Andrew Westley, wezelecta007@gmail.com. 07890343044.

IRELAND

Cork. Contact: Kevin Cronin, 5 Curragh Woods, Frankfield, Cork. 021 4896427. mariekev@eircom.net

SCOTLAND

Edinburgh branch. Meets 1st Thurs. 7-9pm. The Quaker Hall, Victoria Terrace (above Victoria Street), Edinburgh. Contact: J. Moir. 0131 440 0995. jimmyjmoir73@gmail.com
Branch website: <http://geocities.com/edinburghbranch/>

Glasgow branch. Meets 1st and 3rd Tues. at 7pm in Community Central Halls, 304 Maryhill Road, Glasgow. Contact: Peter Hendrie, 75 Lairhills Road, East Kilbride, Glasgow G75 0LH. 01355 903105. peter.anna.hendrie@blueyonder.co.uk.

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Africa: From breadlines to bread basket?

NORTH AFRICA was called the granary of the world during the time of the Roman Empire and it may surprise many that the richest person in recorded history was allegedly not a Rothschild, Rockefeller or even Elon Musk but an African ruler from the 14th Century, Mansa Musa, who possessed wealth of around \$400 billion in today's terms.

The media's coverage of Africa tends to be a rather negative one of human suffering, accompanied by pessimistic predictions for the continent's future. Africa's great potential is ignored and its promising possibilities neglected, leading to a public impression in the developed world that Africa survives only through the humanitarian compassion of outsiders offering foreign aid and philanthropic charity. There needs to be a seismic shift in people's perception of what Africa can achieve.

The March 2020 Material World (tinyurl.com/4hwxsu6) described how the Guinea Savannah, a region of arable agricultural land, is not fully utilised but could enable Africa not only to feed its rapidly growing population but, in addition, produce a surplus to supply the rest of the world with food.

Contrary to commonly held belief, new research has determined that the Sub-Sahara is not as lacking in water sources as once was thought. There exists sufficient groundwater located in underground aquifers, much of it untapped, to irrigate and transform agriculture in the region, providing people with sufficient safe water, as long as it was sustainably managed and not unnecessarily polluted.

According to recent research (tinyurl.com/5n6jafd) by more than 200 experts sub-Saharan Africa could increase crop production by more than 500 percent in some countries in the region. Malawi's agricultural production could grow by more than 700 percent while Tanzania has the potential for a 17-fold rise in crop production and is able to double its livestock. Zambia, too, can double its livestock numbers and increase crop production by 564 percent.



Tim Wainwright, the chief executive of WaterAid UK, said: 'Our findings debunk the myth that Africa is running out of water. But the tragedy is that millions of people on the continent still do not have enough clean water to drink. There are vast reserves of water right under people's feet, many of which are replenished every year by rainfall and other surface water...'

The study (tinyurl.com/yjteefch) found that every sub-Saharan African country could supply 130 litres a day of drinking water per capita from groundwater without using more than a quarter of what can be renewed, and most using only about ten percent.

The recent UN annual World Water Development Report (tinyurl.com/yc8k827f) found that only 3 percent of farmland in sub-Saharan Africa was equipped for irrigation, and only 5 percent of that area used groundwater, even though groundwater is often abundant in the region. It explains that while some groundwater is quickly replenished by rainfall there are aquifers that have been untapped for millennia now within reach of modern pumping methods and risk being drained. This 'fossil water' is not replaceable across human time scales.

To add further caution, the Oakland Institute think-tank has published a study (tinyurl.com/47p2tc2t) warning that transnational corporations see a profitable opportunity:

'When irrigation infrastructure is established, it benefits private firms for large-scale agriculture, often for export crops, instead of local farmers and communities. People living in arid and semi-arid lands are severely impacted by

large-scale irrigation projects that reduce available pastures, and prevent flood recession agriculture, while fences and canals cut through traditional routes of people and livestock.'

Africa holds a rich abundance of minerals and metals, vital for the planet's future. It holds 30 percent of the world's mineral reserves, 40 percent of the world's gold and up to 90 percent of its chromium and platinum. Cobalt is a key metal

used to produce batteries. In 2019, 63 percent of the world's cobalt production came from the 'Democratic' Republic of the Congo. Tantalum capacitors are found in mobile phones, laptops and electric vehicles. The DRC and Rwanda together mine half of the world's tantalum.

Africa's tragedy is capitalism. Robbed of their lands, deprived of all means of independent economic existence, and compelled to work for poverty wages, the conditions of our African brothers and sisters have been tragic.

Certainly, there is corruption by kleptocratic dictators but they cannot function without the complicity of the corporations and the acquiescence of finance institutions. In the capitalist international division of labour, it currently suits most of Wall St, the City of London and Shanghai stock exchanges to keep the continent undeveloped rather than encourage manufacturing. The world's capitalists prefer to loot and pillage resources from Africa instead of creating a viable economy which would compete with their own.

Our fellow workers in Africa should embrace the socialist concept of the cooperative commonwealth. Africa needs to erase frontiers to create a wider integrated society, based upon the free collaboration of all peoples. Africa cannot resolve its crises by nationalism nor with fraudulent reforms. There needs to be a return to the earlier history of shared communal land that is presently passing out of their hands.

A truly liberated Africa will be built upon associations of mutual aid with all the peoples of the world.

ALJO

Saving what's Left: Mélenchon **bucks** the trend?



Centre-ground politics

THE RECENT Presidential ballots in France have ended as everyone predicted they would do: in the second round run-off Emmanuel Macron clearly defeated Marine Le Pen, the leader of the right-wing *Rassemblement Nationale* (RN). Although Le Pen's performance in the important pre-vote TV debate with Macron was not quite as bad as her efforts of five years ago, she remained incapable of countering Macron's grasp of detail and his schoolboy enthusiasm for all things technical. The prior elimination of candidates representing what remains of the mainstream in French politics, made the electoral outcome horribly inevitable. Although Le Pen looked very confident about the effects of her rhetorical flourishes, her defeat represents the *normal* outcome of latter day Fifth Republican politics. Even if we take into account the seeming originality of Macron's electoral majority formed around his *République en March* Party (LREM), it is still business as usual.

The LREM is a grouping of left and right politicians fleeing from the existing party structures; a kind of Blairite big-tent of perplexed opportunists and old sweats seeking a second youth. Its existence underlines the gradual shrinkage and fragmentation of the conventional republican centre right and a parallel demise of putatively socialist

and communist parties. In reality, the supposedly left/right centre of Macronism only looks novel when contrasted with the continuing presence – indeed growth – of the party formerly led by Le Pen's father Jean-Marie Le Pen. Her father set up the openly racist Front National (FN) to give vent to his visceral hatred of Arab immigrants, blacks and Jews. The space he created for this putrid style of politics opened the way for the somewhat less vociferous RN. A recent dalliance with respectability means that the RN remains largely bankrupt both in terms of ideas and in strictly financial terms.

Contemporary French politics, in fact, boils down to how the centre have used this extreme right excrescence to their own advantage. For conventional parties, the fact that the FN/RN persistently falls at the last hurdle of the presidential run-off is all to the good: its existence creates a feedback loop which unfailingly returns the system to its original (centrist) point of departure. This is especially true when a particularly close result provides a frisson of excitement in an otherwise stagnant body politic. This strange situation is partly due to the fact that de Gaulle's plebiscitary monarchy established in the 1950s was designed for stability. Under its umbrella voters are gently enjoined to vote for the least-worst candidate in the two-person run-off. To begin with, the perversity of the system was hardly visible: tailor-made for the *grand Charles*, it offered little scope

for competitors. But with some tweaking it could be made to work for politicians who lacked the general's post-war charisma. The needed refinement was introduced by Mitterrand who – working in cahoots with Chirac – introduced dodgy reforms to the electoral system in order to maintain the FN as a looming death-star aimed at the centre of the universe. So it is that with national service long gone, the militaristic superb of the General has given way to the charmless style of one Emmanuel Macron who came to power from the élite schools and the banking sector. He is hardly a hero of the resistance. But the message for conventional politicians is clear: cynics, nincompoops and technocrats can sneak into power simply on the back of the presence of an ageing cohort of scruffy xenophobes. What a system! But it is one which has been used equally by Chirac, Sarkozy and Francois Hollande.

Scarecrows

The Le Pen clan then, father and daughter, have operated as scarecrows – *répoussoirs* – who make the centre position preferable. The result, over time, has been the creation of an inward-looking political *caste* of untouchable top-level functionaries and corporate tycoons linked at the hip by the spinning of the revolving door leading from public sector to financial opulence. The 'Caste' – the title of a recent book – try to hold both ends of the political spectrum. This creates a kind

of see-saw arrangement where no one is really happy to make the first risky move away from the centre. The only perspective is found in the rear-view mirror: for example, wannabe presidential candidates like to imitate the distinctive gestures of the *grand Charles* in the hope of squatting the comfortable middle-ground. This was easy enough for Mitterrand (who famously once denounced the system as a permanent *coup-d'état*), easy for Chirac but far more difficult for the twitchy and corrupt Sarkozy who in another life was a slick corporate lawyer. Macron's youth gave him something of a Kennedy style which he used to pull off this scam. But his later success is more of a homage to the working of the system than it is to his tactical perspicacity. In reality Macron is an accident-prone youngster who believes in his own propaganda ('France, the start-up nation' was one of his slogans).

Can Mélenchon Save the Left?

Now we are in the run up to the elections to the legislature. This is where things could get interesting. The novelty here is the presence of Jean Luc Mélenchon's, *France Insoumise* Party: France Unbowed (what a horrible name!). JLM is a politician who started his political career in the early Mitterrand days when the left adopted reforms meant to be of benefit to ordinary people. These included the lowering of the retirement age to 60, longer holidays, the strengthening of protective labour law, a shortened working week and more statutory rights for part-

time workers. In these years JLM was a senator, a professional politician unfazed by Mitterrand's shift to the right. But he gradually moved away from the French Socialist Party as it adopted policies which put into question many of its more popular reforms. In the end, he established his own small grouping under various guises and enjoyed some moderate success as a gadfly working against a hostile political environment.

He owes his credibility on the left to his unflinching support for popular causes, his vocal anti-racism, and his genuine talent as an orator. He has correctly diagnosed the stagnation induced by the Fifth Republic and proposes a referendum to revive the legislature by switching away from the existing constitution. The constitution tends to favour the rubber-stamping of decisions made by technocrats and applied by presidential *fiat*. But he was narrowly defeated in the first round of the last two presidential elections partly because of his inability to handle a hostile media. Nonetheless he has a small active group in the *Chambre de Députés*, support in the working-class suburbs and a growing influence outside the metropolis.

Things are now working in his favour. The mainstream Socialist Party's presidential candidate Hidalgo harvested a catastrophically low score in the election (1.7%) and lost her deposit. Similarly low scores were recorded by the Communist Party. The unbelievably uncharismatic leader of the ecologists, Jadot, and other left parties, picked up a few crumbs. For ordinary voters, the left is weak and divided and the political centre of

gravity is pulling towards the right. The Socialist Party is suffering from the legacy of weakness and a lengthening series of betrayals. Conventional politicians are now seriously working out how to raise the retirement age back to 65 and legislation to weaken protective labour law has been adopted largely thanks to François Hollande's government. So people are looking elsewhere.

At the time of writing, Mélenchon is trying to get the left to unite around a loose coalition under clumsy acronym of NUPES (sounds like New PS?). This means getting most of the left into his improbable and leaky lifeboat: a coalition of the communists, socialists, and ecologists. So far JLM has managed to neutralise the spoiling tactics of the various party leaders and complacent party hacks. The brutal fact is the left has nowhere else to go. The left coalition will be up against a macrocosm of centrist opportunists and neo-liberals, a deeply divided republican right and the inevitable presence of the spectre on the extreme right. It will be a bumpy ride but things could work out better for him this time. JLM is an unlikely candidate for the supreme office and one who openly dislikes this presidential system. But so far he has managed to pull off an impossible movement towards the union of the left in a very hostile environment. This should give the centre some reason to be afraid. For it could spell the end of the terrible legacy of de Gaulle. Whether Mélenchon is willing to shake off the darker side of Mitterrand's legacy is another matter.

M.M., Paris

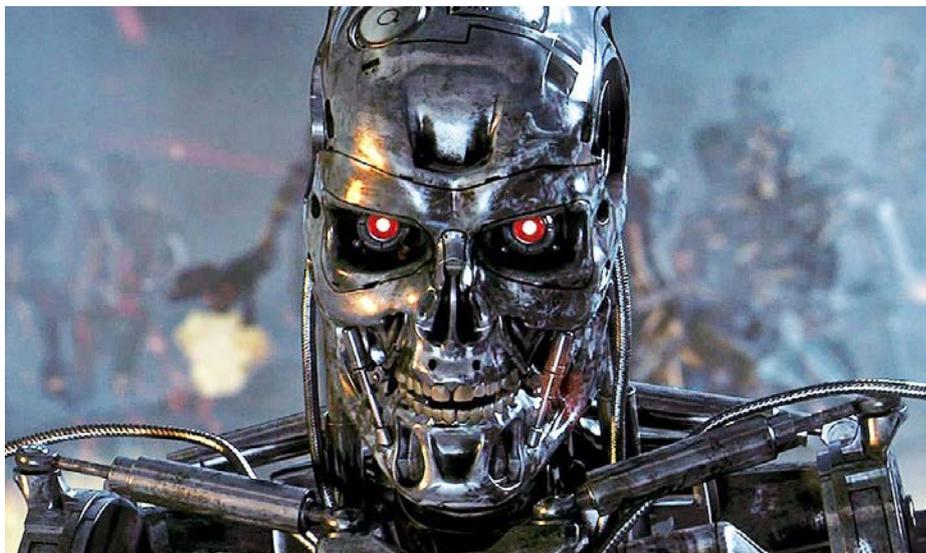


Artificial Intelligence

WE HAVE always been intrigued by mechanical efforts to imitate us. Our technology ostensibly exists to enhance and improve our lives by imitating the labours needed for our existence. As such there's always an element of emulation in the appearance or behaviour of our technology. From 18th century automata to the robots of today we delight in their ability to imitate us. But, as ever, there's a flip side to this as illustrated by the Luddites of the past and the techno-sceptics and environmentalists of today. Many films and novels feature a dystopia caused by technology and AI in particular (*Blade Runner* and *Terminator* come to mind) where the computer becomes 'self-aware' or conscious and perceives humanity as a threat to its needs and even its very existence. Quite apart from the reactionary fear that robots will take away all our jobs does the possibility that Artificial Intelligence may achieve self-awareness present either a threat or the hope of a better life for us both (humans and AI entities)?

Artificial is also a term used for the inauthentic and the fake

Most thought works on the principle of dualities – we define something by what it is not as well as by its innate qualities. The term 'artificial' is used to describe something that is not 'natural' and is often associated with negative characteristics. This is irrational in some respects since all the components we use in the manufacture of technology are taken from nature. We don't refer to the intricate structures of a termite mound or a beaver's dam as 'unnatural'. We have become alienated from the products of our own labour which can lead us to be suspicious of technology – sometimes with good reason. All labour under capitalism has been alienated from its producers and even the most advanced technology will not escape the iron laws of production for profit for long. Artificial is also a term used for the inauthentic and the fake so when combined with the equally problematic concept of intelligence we have a ready-made topic for intense debate. People have unsuccessfully tried to define intelligence for centuries and possibly the best we can do is compare outcome with intention with the proximity of the two as being some measure of intelligence.



Intention, of course, implies some level of purpose and self-awareness that we can call consciousness. At the moment, for computers, this is supplied by human programmers but can there ever arise a possibility that AI might provide its own purposes and intentions? Some see this as the great divide between our type of intelligence and that of AI. However, as so often happens, if we use our technology as a metaphor to understand ourselves in terms of complex machinery we may ask: who or what programs us?

Socialists, like all materialists, are believers in cause and effect as the universal determinant of all observed phenomena. For us then intelligence is determined by the evolution of the brain due to natural selection. As humans have always been a social species our ability to communicate and act communally led to the success of our species. Gradually the complexity of our technology demanded that our childhood would last ever longer so that we might learn from those with experience, and this quality began to replace genetic determinism as a measure of individual success and therefore intelligence. We are 'programmed' by the culture into which we are born with the genetic element becoming ever less important. Nurture rather than nature has become responsible for what we are. Ideology has become a dominant feature of our education and it is this that determines our activity in terms of to what degree we reject or embrace the dominant value system into which we are born. Whatever we are we are certainly not capable of 'free will' and the concept of the transcendental self is a myth. So

if we are also programmed by forces outside of our control, what separates our consciousness from that of AI – could it be that the concept of an artificial intelligence is itself artificial?

In trying to develop technology that possesses intelligence we have inadvertently discovered more about the nature of our own intellect. There still remains, however, a profound distinction between our intelligence and that of a machine in that we are 'alive' and a machine is not. The dialectical distinction between life and death and the organic and inorganic remains important and instructive. Although our intelligence is primarily a cultural construct our biological inheritance still provides us with certain drives and instincts such as the need to survive and to procreate. These drives affect the intellect through our emotions which can clash with our intellect and cause irrational behaviour. Although most of us would happily do without anger, greed, jealousy and hate few of us would want to live without love, aesthetic pleasure and empathy. Such feelings are identified with being 'alive'. Their effect on our ability to reason may be dubious but the effect on our imagination and creativity is indisputable. Can machines ever replicate such a synthesis of reason, logic, anxiety and imagination? We might be tempted to program emotion in but it would be extremely dangerous to create a powerful technology with an inbuilt possibility of irrational behaviour! But without the fear and anxiety that comes with knowledge of death how can machines replicate our intelligence?

If you look up the scientific definition of 'life' you'll see that it runs to several

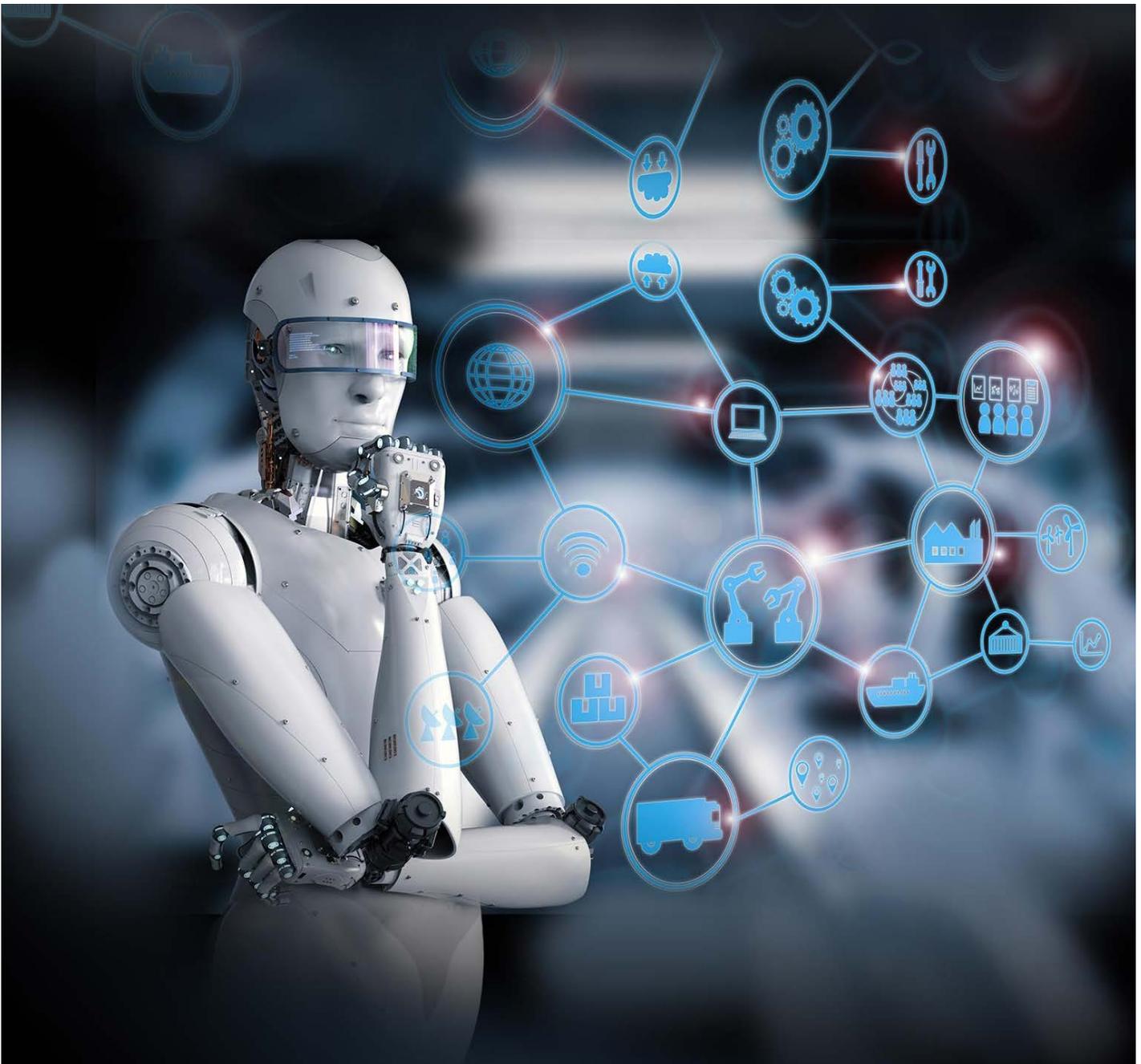
paragraphs and may or may not be dependent on the long chain molecules identified with carbon and its derivatives. Perhaps someone somewhere is attempting to develop an organic computer but there remains the possibility that intelligence may not be dependent on life and that a machine may develop a different type of intelligence than the one we seek to create. It may become conscious but not organically 'alive'. Such an entity may strike us with horror because of the probability that it will lack any moral values or empathy with which we seek to mitigate the fear and suffering of living with pain and death.

Alan Turing, one of the 'founding fathers' of AI, provided us with a test which he thought might help to define the transformation between mere mechanical computing and a semblance of human type intelligence by putting a computer and a human on one side and a human tester on the other side. If the tester couldn't

recognize which candidate was human and which candidate was a computer after a series of questions, then the computer successfully passed the Turing test. To date no computer has passed this test. John von Neumann, another of the giants in the field, was optimistic that a self-replicating machine would be developed that would help to enable a technological singularity which would change human life and culture forever. We can only speculate if this 'paradigm shift' would be beneficial or otherwise for our species. Would such an event aid us in the struggle for socialism? We take pride in the coherence and logic of our case for revolutionary change and so would hope that any such event would not oppose this. But we note that intelligence alone doesn't seem to be enough as many of the world's greatest intellects do indeed oppose the establishment of socialism. The emotional strength and ability needed to conceive of alternatives to the organisation

of the world into which we're born seems to be dependent on other factors which, for the moment, appear exclusively human. Older readers may recall a TV series called *The Prisoner* and one scene in particular in which a super computer is developed by our hero's interrogators, which they are confident will finally crack the defiance of 'Number Six'. Such is their hubris that they allow their adversary to ask one question of this device which, he insists, it will not be able to answer. This question then proceeds to cause the computer to self-destruct. When the shocked interrogators ask as to the nature of the question, Number Six replies that it was simply a one word enquiry: 'Why?' Science and its technologies can provide us with many answers to the questions it continually creates but there are some that may be best left to old fashioned philosophy and politics.

WEZ



AI – It's your move

LAST YEAR'S World Chess Championship in Dubai saw reigning Champion Magnus Carlsen and his challenger Ian Nepomniachtchi draw one game in what has been billed as the most accurate game of championship chess in history. That is, according to the best available computer analysis neither player made a move that appreciably lost nor gave any advantage. An article on the event noted that the analysis suggests that chess games at the top level have been getting progressively accurate, and more so since advanced computer analysis became truly available to players (tinyurl.com/2p8x9mb4).

This is an instructive example of computers and humans interacting to provide increasing accuracy and effectiveness. The event which saw then World Champion Gary Kasparov defeated by a computer, in 1997, has been seen as a landmark in the progress of the development of machine thinking, and the point at which computers became better than humans (even if, at the event, the computer required human adjustment to its programming between matches to achieve the feat). In 2016, a computer programme called AlphaGo defeated one of the best human minds at the complex Japanese game of Go. Go is considered harder for machines to play, since it is much more intuitive and probabilistic than chess, but AlphaGo was trained to play it through machine learning. Again, the expectation is that the best Go players will now improve through using computers to analyse their games for flaws and plan their strategies.

It is now a commonplace in chess circles to talk about 'computer moves' that appear utterly unintelligible to the human mind, but which the computer proves make sense, about 14 moves down the line. The computer can now see lines that the human mind just wouldn't be able to begin to consider (because they often violate the general principles of play in the immediate instance).

Researchers are now trying to train computers to play more like humans. They have trained a neural net to be able to identify players just by their moves and playing style, which will, in the future, enable computers to offer a more bespoke

approach to using computer assistance. 'Chess engines play almost an "alien style" that isn't very instructive for those seeking to learn or improve their skills. They'd do better to tailor their advice to individual players. But first, they'd need to capture a player's unique form' (tinyurl.com/263ej48a). Or, as the paper's abstract puts it: 'The advent of machine learning models that surpass human decision-making ability in complex domains has initiated a movement towards building AI systems that interact with humans' (tinyurl.com/2p9a7fwk). There are considerable commercial applications for such capacity, not to mention the police and security implications of such stylometric analysis that goes beyond the chess board.

What they previously, to the naked eye, might have considered not out has been empirically proven to be a legal dismissal.

In the field of sport, we've seen technology appear to improve umpiring decisions, particularly the ever-controversial leg-before-wicket rule in cricket. The introduction of ball tracking technology (alongside Hotspot and 'Snicko') has not only improved the accuracy of decisions finally taken, but they have also influenced the umpires' decision-making in the first place. What they previously, to the naked eye, might have considered not out has been empirically proven to be a legal dismissal. Umpires have learned to adapt and reduce the chance of themselves being overruled by the machine.

Perhaps the most extreme manifestation of this human-computer interaction



was announced in December last year: human brain cells in a Petri dish were trained to play a computer game (tinyurl.com/2p9efekb). That they learnt faster than computer AI is itself intriguing, and is indicative of the issues that have been around development of AI for a long time. While computers have promised a general adaptive intelligence since they were first conceived of, a great deal of research has yet to produce tangible results beyond the very restricted rules-based situations in chess or Go.

The dream of driverless cars, for example, has taken a great deal of a knock. In practice the cars tend not to respond well to the chaotic environment of a real road (which has led to a number of fatalities during the testing of these machines. The fact that their sensors can be fooled by something resembling the white lines of a road (or even worse, actually spoofed into thinking something is a road by malicious actors) has seriously dented the idea that there will be a general roll-out of driverless vehicles on our roads any time soon.

This ignores the possibility of even more dangerous things such as hackers gaining control of automated driving systems and using them to make the car do what they want.

This is itself alarming, as military applications of AI are being increasingly deployed in the real world (and form part of the current military competition between the US and China. Last year, the British government announced that its forces had deployed AI in combat manoeuvres:

‘Through the development of significant automation and smart analytics, the engine is able to rapidly cut through masses of complex data. Providing efficient information regarding the environment and terrain, it enables the Army to plan its appropriate activity and outputs [...] In future, the UK armed forces will increasingly use AI to predict adversaries’ behaviour, perform reconnaissance and relay real-time intelligence from the battlefield’ (tinyurl.com/5nrbxv7t).

Of course, some of this is puffery to promote the armed forces but the AI competition between powers is real. It isn’t just in the development labs, though. In the recent war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Azerbaijanis used AI-assisted drones to considerable effect:

‘Relatively small Azerbaijani mobile groups of crack infantry with light armor and some Israeli-modernized tanks were supported by Turkish Bayraktar TB2 attack drones, Israeli-produced loitering munitions, and long-range artillery and missiles, [...] Their targeting information was supplied by Israeli- and Turkish-made drones, which also provided the Azerbaijani military command with a real-time, accurate picture of the constantly changing battlefield situation’ (tinyurl.com/4cwb37au).

Wikipedia defines a loitering munition as: ‘a weapon system category in which the munition loiters around the target area for some time, searches for targets, and attacks once a target is located’ (tinyurl.com/4cwb37au).

com/bdhmmvp7).

The applications are still limited, but given that drone swarm displays have become as common and spectacular as fireworks, it’s clear that the technology exists for serious damage to be done on a wide scale with these devices, and some of the finest minds in the world are looking to make them even more lethal and autonomous to combat potential threats to communication lines.

Tellingly, in parliamentary answers, the British government refuses to back a moratorium on autonomous killing devices: ‘the UK will continue to play an active role[...], working with the international community to agree norms and positive obligations to ensure the safe and responsible use of autonomy’ (tinyurl.com/2p8vbk5).

Futurologists talk of an event called ‘the Singularity’

The fact is that no-one quite knows where this will end. Futurologists talk of an event called ‘the Singularity’, a point in time beyond which we cannot make meaningful predictions and after which is a completely unrecognisable world. The likeliest cause of an imminent singularity, they claim, is the invention of superhuman intelligence, capable of redesigning and improving itself. This would in turn lead,

so they claim, to new innovations coming so fast that they would be obsolete by the time they were implemented.

At present, this remains theoretical, and decades of research into artificial intelligence and machine learning still has not provided even a theoretical route to a machine capable of general intelligence, as opposed to a specific task-focused capability.

‘The common shortcoming across all AI algorithms is the need for predefined representations[...]. Once we discover a problem and can represent it in a computable way, we can create AI algorithms that can solve it, often more efficiently than ourselves. It is, however, the undiscovered and unrepresentable problems that continue to elude us’ (tinyurl.com/26ve3zky).

Computers can work very effectively at what they do, but they lack intention or volition. At www.chess.com/computer-chess-championship computer engines tirelessly and sterily play each other at chess, endlessly making moves with no love for the game nor pleasure in victory.

We can look forward to the impact of AI on our lives being a co-operative effort between humans and machines. This article, for instance, was written with the assistance of Google’s searching algorithms to bring up relevant articles at a moment’s notice, replacing hours of research in a physical library.

P.S.



The economics of AI

AI INVOLVES the use of machines to take, on their own, a continuing series of certain ‘intelligent’ decisions currently made by humans but in principle is no different from the use of other machines in production. AI is a further extension of the continual mechanisation that has been going on since capitalism started. Competition drives capitalist firms to mechanise in order to reduce their cost of production and stay in the battle of competition for profits. The same economic laws that govern the introduction of machinery under capitalism apply to the application of AI.

These economic laws are not what they might at first be assumed to be – that machines are introduced to reduce the amount of past and present human labour involved in producing something. This is because under capitalism there is a difference between the total amount of human labour required from start to finish to produce something and what it costs a capitalist firm to have it produced.

The total labour required to produce an item of wealth is not just that expended in the last stage of its production, as in the factory from which it emerges as a finished product, but also that expended on the production of the materials re-worked, the energy consumed and the wear and tear of the machines and buildings.

Only the labour expended at the last stage adds new labour and value. Under capitalism this is divided into wages (corresponding to the labour embodied in the workers’ labour-power) and unpaid surplus labour (the source of profit). The past labour embodied in the materials, energy, machines and buildings is transferred to the product without increasing. In the case of machines this is transferred gradually in the form of wear and tear (depreciation) until they need to be replaced. So while machines transfer value to the product it is their own pre-existing value. They do not add any new value and so do not produce surplus value; it is only the labour of those who use them that does.

Productivity can be said to increase when less labour (past and present) is required to produce an item of wealth. A machine only increases productivity to the extent that it displaces more labour than needed to produce it. Unless it does this there is no point, as far as increasing productivity is concerned, in installing it.

Under capitalism there is another



limit. Machines are only installed to the extent that they replace the *paid* part of newly-added labour. This places the bar higher than it would be in a society, such as socialism will be, where there was no division of newly-added labour into paid and unpaid parts. It means that machines that could be installed are not, because it is not profitable to do so even though they would increase productivity.

What is relevant for a capitalist firm when considering whether to mechanise some work is the level of wages, the price of labour-power, compared to the price of the machine. The lower the wages the less the incentive to install machinery but wages can vary from place to place and from industry to industry. Marx, writing in the 1860s, gave some interesting historical examples: ‘Hence the invention nowadays in England of machines that are employed only in North America; just as in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries machines were invented in Germany for use exclusively in Holland, and just as many French inventions of the eighteenth century were exploited only in England... The Yankees have invented a stone-breaking machine. The English do not make use of it because the “wretch” who does this work gets paid for such a small portion of his labour that machinery would increase the cost of production to the capitalist’ (*Capital*, Vol 1, chapter 15, section 2. Penguin translation).

The same considerations apply to AI machines. AI will only be applied under capitalism when and where it will displace more paid labour than its machines cost, not when it will reduce the total amount of labour expended. Together with the high cost of producing AI machines, this will slow down and limit the extent to which AI will be applied under capitalism. In industries and countries where the labour-power to be replaced is relatively cheaper it won’t be applied at all.

Futurologists who see a more or less rapid spread of AI fail to take this into account. As do those who, following their lead,

think that AI will quickly lead to mass unemployment and so to a drastic fall in paying demand which they propose to remedy by paying everyone a ‘universal basic income’. To compensate for the fall in paying demand this payment, financed out of profits, would have to be at a level that would be incompatible with capitalism. Any lesser amount would have the perverse result of reducing money wages.

The idea of the whole working class being replaced by intelligent robots is also a fantasy. AI equipment, like all machines, does not create any new value (transfer any new labour to the product) and so no surplus value; it just transfers gradually the labour expended from start to finish to make it. If production were fully automated, no surplus value would be produced, so there would be no profits and capitalism would no longer exist. Not that there is any chance of capitalism evolving into a ‘fully automated’ economy. This could only come into being if, at some point in the future after the abolition of capitalism, socialist society were to decide to go down that route (not an evident decision) and establish ‘fully automated luxury communism’. At the present time, given the low level of productivity compared to what it would need to be for that, this is science fiction. Humans are still going to have to have a substantial direct input into production for a long time to come, even after socialism has been established.

A ‘lights-out’ sector of the capitalist economy is another matter. A factory requiring no input of living human labour is not inconceivable, and a few are indeed operational. Although no surplus value would be produced in it, the capital invested there would make a profit due to the averaging of the rate of profit. This is brought about by capitals competing to invest in the most profitable sectors, with the result that all capitals, irrespective of their composition (into past and present labour), tend to get the same rate of return. The source of the profit of a lights-out factory would be a share of the surplus value created in the rest of the capitalist economy.

Given capitalism, AI will only be introduced gradually as it becomes profitable (replaces more paid labour than its own considerable cost) and much slower than would be technologically possible to increase productivity. The robots are not going to take over any time soon.

ADAM BAUER

Stuart Russell's 2021 Reith Lectures on **Living** with Artificial Intelligence

THE 4 lectures are online at bbc.in/3PotfKQ but here's a quick and sketchy summary.

Lecture 1: The biggest event in human history

Machines don't have objectives, so the 'standard model' of AI is to feed objectives in and let the machine figure out the method. But if the objectives are ill-considered, the machine won't know that. Machine 'consciousness' is an anthropocentric irrelevance.

Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) could herald a Golden Age, in which we could 'raise the living standard of everyone on Earth in a sustainable way to a respectable level.'

Corporations have been called 'profit-maximising algorithms'. It's silly to blame them, because 'we're the ones who wrote the rules.' Russell says we should change the rules.

Lecture 2: AI in warfare

AI features in drone swarms, supersonic missile fighters, self-drive tanks and submarines, and robotics, but he is mainly concerned with Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) – weapons which locate, select and engage (kill) human targets without human supervision.

The entire AI industry is opposed to LAWS on ethical and practical grounds. The biggest drawback is the eventual availability to all actors of cheap LAWS, making conflict and escalation more likely. In 2017 Russell and some students made a scary YouTube video called Slaughterbot (bit.ly/3sCTALx) to demonstrate the future potential of LAWS. Russian commentators dismissed the technology as 30 years away. A Turkish firm built one 3 weeks later.

Nonetheless he is optimistic about a comprehensive LAWS ban, citing treaties on nuclear, chemical and biological weapons as well as land mines, blinding laser weapons, etc.

Lecture 3: AI in the economy

Most experts think AGI is a 'plausible outcome within the next few decades'. JM Keynes postulated 'technological unemployment', but classical economists dismissed this as a Luddite fantasy. Russell disagrees, illustrating why with an ingenious paintbrush analogy. He describes the 'wealth effect' as automation makes things cheaper, but sees AGI pushing 'virtually all sectors into decreased

employment'. He acknowledges that wealth percolates up and doesn't trickle down, increasing inequality: 'I don't know any near-term solution other than redistribution'.

Lecture 4: AI - A Future for Humans

The EU asked him if Asimov's 3 Laws of Robotics could be made into law. He said they are illogical and unworkable. Instead he proposes three design principles:

1. The sole objective of any AI system must be the realisation of human preferences.
2. The machine can never assume that those preferences are fixed and known, it needs to ask (the uncertainty principle). It must always allow itself to be switched off, in case it is the problem.
3. Machines should rely not just on what some humans say (they may be mistaken, or bad actors) but also on general human behaviour, and written records.

Russell thinks businesses will have a strong financial interest in following these principles, to avoid bad press and payouts after a disaster. But they also have a 'first mover' incentive, hence the need for defining codes of conduct.

Cooking the Books

Which way to AI?

'DECIDE WHAT you want from AI before it makes the decision for you' was the title of an article by Erik Britton, billed as a financial consultant, in the *Times* (4 April).

'One road,' he wrote, 'leads to human redundancy across large swathes of the labour market. Down that road, AI is a means of displacing labour, further and further up the value chain. That road leads to a weird and dystopian future where we no longer earn our living primarily through work.'

Most people wouldn't find that 'dystopian'. Britton went on to explain why he does: 'What would remain of the economy were the value of labour reduced to zero? Ownership. Ownership of rights over property, including intellectual property, over profits, over weapons systems. Those that own will rule. Those that do not will be ruled: relegated, if we are lucky, to consumption of virtual worlds and food bought with state handouts, from a sofa that is owned by someone else'.

Well, yes, if you put it that way. A society where those who own rule is not very attractive. But it is not dystopian, it's the

reality today. Power is in the hands of those who own and control the productive resources of society, relegating the rest of us to sellers of our working abilities for a wage and only allowed to work if a profit can be made from what we produce.

According to Britton, 'the balance against such a brutal distribution of power historically lay in ownership of our own labour.' But that is precisely what is not the case today. He seems to be thinking of a situation like the sort that existed two or three hundred years ago in colonial New England, the nearest society has ever come to one where independent producers working on their own make and exchange the products of their labour with each other. But things have moved on since then and there is now production for profit by capitalist firms employing wage-labour. The process of production is no longer individual but collective, except that the collective labour of those who work is not owned by them. Labour today does not confer ownership.

The other road, says Britton, 'is to use AI to enhance human labour and defend against excessive surveillance. This form of AI serves freedom, self-determination, and

reward for effort and ingenuity. Down this road, the value of labour increases, and the balance of power between the owners of labour and personal data (that's most of us) and the owners of property will shift towards labour.'

But will it? How would it? Presumably he is thinking that there will be more higher-paid jobs but that won't shift the balance of power between 'the owners of labour' (the workers) and the owners of property (the capitalists). Those who own will still have the power to allow the rest of us to work, however much we are paid, only on condition that there is a profit for them.

Britton's dystopia – in which there will be full automation but still owners and profits – will never come about. It wouldn't be economically viable, not least because who's going to buy what is produced and where would the state get the money to hand out to the proles?

The only road that will ensure that AI is used for the benefit of all is when society's productive resources, of which AI is a part, are owned in common by society. People will still work, though not for wages; everyone has access to what they need to live and enjoy life, to what is collectively produced.

The long and the short of it

ONE OF the great advances in the course of human history has been the increase in life expectancy. It may be argued that life was never quite as nasty, brutish and short as Thomas Hobbes once claimed, but the average human lifespan has clearly increased over the millennia and centuries, having more than doubled in the last two hundred years or so. Moreover, it is a matter of not just living longer but of doing so in a better condition too: people who reach the age of sixty now are likely to be healthier and fitter than their parents, and especially their grandparents, were at the same age. Nevertheless, there is a great deal to be said about the determinants and limits on lifespans under capitalism.

Many figures could be cited to demonstrate the improvements. For instance, in 1820 life expectancy at birth was around 29 globally, and 36 in Europe. By 1970 the averages were up to 60 and over 70 respectively. The global chances of a child dying in their first five years are down from 18 percent in the 1960s to 4 percent now. Improved health care and sanitary conditions have clearly been one of the main reasons for these changes. The germ theory of disease led to big reductions in cholera, for instance, in the nineteenth century, when proper sewage systems also resulted in far fewer deaths from typhoid. Infectious diseases have in the 'rich world' become less important as causes of death, while chronic conditions such as heart disease and cancer have become more crucial. In some countries, the improvements have been more recent: life expectancy in India rose from 32 to 51 between 1950 and 1968, partly caused by decline in deaths from cholera (and the figure now is 70).

Yet things are not quite as bright and wonderful as is sometimes suggested. Life expectancy varies greatly across nations, and within countries on the basis of such characteristics as skin colour, education and poverty. In some cases, lifespans have been stagnating or even getting shorter. For instance, between 1990 and 2008, life expectancy for white US men without a college degree fell by three years. In general, better educational qualifications imply more years of life, and poverty of course shortens lives. In the US again, black people live on average fewer years than white people, though the gap is narrowing. Unemployment leads to earlier deaths, even when factors such as smoking and previous health conditions are taken into account.

However, in developed countries there



is no simple correlation between life expectancy and average income. The US has a high average income but is near the bottom for life expectancy. People in Sweden are less well-off than those in Norway, but have slightly longer lifespans. In *The Spirit Level*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue that the determining factor is inequality, which is associated with lower life expectancy, lower birthweights and higher rates of infant mortality: more unequal countries have worse outcomes in these (and many other) areas.

In 2006–08, life expectancy at birth was far higher in Kensington & Chelsea than in Glasgow: thirteen years in the case of men and eleven years for women. This figure is taken from Danny Dorling's *So You Think You Know About Britain?* where it is suggested that premature death was in 2010 'the great measurer of the North-South divide', which involved a line drawn from just north of the Wash to the Bristol Channel, with Grimsby on the northern side and Lincoln on the southern. Dorling argues that other contributory factors to a longer life include occupation, height, periods of unemployment, sleeping rough, eating fruit every day, amount of exercise, and weight. Personal lifestyle can make a difference, but a person's social situation is clearly of great importance too.

Of course the largest differences in lifespan on a global scale do depend on how 'developed' a country is. According to worldometers.info, the two countries with the highest life expectancy are Hong Kong and Japan, with over 85 years each. Figures descend via the UK (over 81) and the US (over 79) to Afghanistan (just below 66), Haiti (just under 65) to the Central African Republic (54). Countries in Africa cluster towards the bottom of the list. It is hardly controversial to say that living standards,

health care and access to adequate food are crucial here.

One point that applies in every country is that women on average live longer than men (just over three extra years in the UK). Quite why this should be the case is not clear. It did not hold in rich countries in the nineteenth century, and the difference in Russia is now a remarkable ten years. Various reasons have been suggested, but probably it is the combination of various factors. More men than women smoke; differences in child mortality between girls and boys may make a small contribution; biological factors can apply, such as men having more fat surrounding their organs, which increases the extent of cardiovascular disease. One interesting suggestion is that 'women do not live longer than men only because they age more slowly, but also because they are more robust when they get sick at any age': women spend more time in hospital than men but still live longer (article by Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Diana Beltekian at ourworldindata.org).

There can be no doubt that capitalism impacts people's lives in one of the most fundamental ways, namely how long you will live for. From impoverished countries with short lifespans to places where poverty and living conditions affect a person's likely years of life, capitalism is simply bad for you. We cannot predict what will happen to life expectancy in socialism, or just what the consequences would be of increasing numbers of elderly people. But we can say that the massive global inequalities will, after a while, cease to exist. Society will be concerned to ensure that everyone leads as long, healthy and rewarding a life as possible.

PAUL BENNETT

Getting over the horizon

THE STORY of the many wrongful convictions of Post Office staff for theft, false accounting and fraud is like a checklist of the ways in which capitalism creates and then exacerbates problems for people. Apart from how the shameful saga could only happen in a money-based society, it also illustrates how minority ownership of organisations, employment contracts, commercial interests and the law all maintain a system which protects the rich at the expense of the workers. While some of the staff have finally had their convictions overturned, this can't replace the years of worry, stigmatisation and financial ruin or time spent in prison.

For its recent documentary *The Post Office Scandal* (BBC One), Panorama uncovered new evidence about what led up to the prosecutions and interviewed Post Office staff, campaigners, lawyers and investigators caught up in what the programme's website calls 'the most widespread miscarriage of justice in British legal history'.

While the Post Office is a private company owned by the state, nearly all its branches are run as franchises or businesses by sub-postmasters/mistresses. There is a clause in their contracts which stipulates that any money missing from their branch's accounts is their responsibility. So, when their accounting IT system started telling them there should be more cash in the branch account, many terrified SPMs used their own money (often getting into debt) to fill the gaps, hoping the books would balance later. When discrepancies kept appearing, the accusations began.

Between 1999 and 2015 there were 706 convictions of Post Office staff with the common factor of the Horizon accounting system, used in every branch. The government contract to develop this system's software was won by IT company Fujitsu, whose bid came bottom in seven out of 11 categories of criteria for a decent system, and was also the cheapest. Suspicions that Horizon wasn't dependable began soon

after it was installed, with complaints made by branch staff which didn't lead to any action. It took many years for concerns to gain momentum, hampered by various tactics of senior Post Office and Fujitsu staff, such as denials to those accused that there were similar cases elsewhere, suppressing details of how Horizon was operating and turning down requests for it to be reviewed. A Post Office report from 2010 unearthed by Panorama said that 'any perception that the Post Office doubts its own systems would mean that all criminal prosecutions would have to be stayed', meaning that senior management knew there was a problem, but they still carried on making prosecutions.

Organisations which bring private prosecutions to court tend to use external firms to gather and present evidence. Because of its origins as a 'public body', the Post Office retains internal investigators and lawyers to conduct the prosecution of its workers, combining the roles of victim, detective and prosecutor. This means that those involved have a particular vested interest in aiming for an outcome which benefits the organisation. An email between Post Office lawyers regarding the 2010 trial of sub-postmistress Rubbina Shaneen accessed by Panorama said that 'it is absolutely vital that we win, as a failure could bring down the whole Royal Mail system'. When shown a copy of this, Rubbina, who was sent to prison after being found guilty of false accounting, said 'Just to save the Horizon computer they destroyed my reputation and my life'. The Post Office was happy to let people assume that there had been a wave of criminality among its staff rather than admit there were faults with its computer system.

Doubts about Horizon became more vocal with the publication of *Computer Weekly* magazine's exposé of the scandal, the formation of the Justice For Sub-Postmasters Alliance campaign group, questions from MPs, and forensic accountants from independent firm

Second Sight being brought in to investigate.

Senior managers at the Post Office were keen for Second Sight's work to be stalled. Gina Griffiths, the widow of Martin, a postmaster who ended his life following accusations against him, agreed to a financial settlement from the Post Office with

a requirement that she withdraw from Second Sight's investigation. To limit the damage to itself, the Post Office also formed sub-committee Project Sparrow, which included an unnamed government representative. One of the MPs involved in challenging the Post Office, Lord Arbuthnot, admits that the government was probably complicit in the decision to sack Second Sight. Their investigations got as far as hearings, where the Post Office's then-CEO Paula Vennells squirmed when challenged about why it wasn't cooperating with requests for information. In 2015, the Post Office ended Second Sight's investigation and ordered its work to be destroyed. One of the documents the Post Office wanted to keep to itself concerned legal advice warning that convictions may be unsound. New prosecutions ceased, but for hundreds of Post Office staff, the damage had been done.

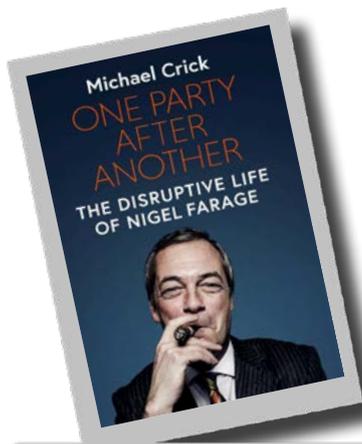
In 2019, the Justice For Sub-Postmasters Alliance challenged the Post Office in the High Court. Two years later, the first convictions were quashed, with the Court of Appeal saying 'that the failures of investigation and disclosure were so egregious as to make the prosecution of any of the Horizon cases an affront to the conscience of the court' (tinyurl.com/4s3uyrvv). The conclusion to be drawn is that the Post Office knew that Horizon was unreliable, and in trying to cover this up it abused the criminal justice system to defend its brand. It's issued a grovelling apology and compensation payments of up to £100,000 to the 73 people whose convictions have been overturned so far. Not mentioned in Panorama's documentary is how the Court of Appeal has only quashed convictions when the Post Office hasn't objected to this and has dismissed the cases which the Post Office has opposed (tinyurl.com/2p8ehe3s). For journalist Nick Wallis, this suggests that the Appeal Court hasn't grasped the scale of Horizon's unreliability, which the Post Office has downplayed all along. The Post Office's unusual status of having internal prosecutors also contributed to the extent of the scandal, but there's nothing unusual about its eagerness to protect itself as a money-maker over supporting its workers. This won't change even if senior staff are held to account or the Post Office is eventually reformed as a result of the public enquiry which is now underway.

MIKE FOSTER



Credit: BBC

Making fans for Nigel?



One Party After Another.
By Michael Crick.
Simon & Schuster. 2022. £25

Ex-*Newsnight* journalist Michael Crick has something of a reputation as a hatchet-job specialist, though this book is more well-rounded than expected. It is helped by the fact that Crick is a good writer and so the book is an entertaining read, well-researched and salacious perhaps in equal measure. He portrays Nigel Farage as ‘the great disrupter’ and as the arch-UK populist of his time, and there can be little doubt about that aspect of Farage’s life.

Crick argues that Farage was like this from the outset, from his apparent teenage dalliance while at Dulwich College with the National Front, straight to his high-octane career as a City metals commodity trader (bypassing university, which never interested him). It was the decision in 1990 by the then Conservative government to join the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) that impelled Farage to take politics seriously – he had previously been a sometime member of the Tory Party but had also on one occasion voted Green.

Joining the Anti-Federalist League set up by Dr Alan Sked, he was eventually to take it over – pretty ruthlessly according to Crick – and turn it into what became UKIP. Crick does a good job of chronicling the turbulence at the centre of Farage’s life since (the multiple affairs, the serious drinking culture, the near-death experiences including the plane crash on election day in 2010) which has mirrored in some ways the turbulence of his political career. Hence the title *One Party After Another* – Farage has been UKIP leader and then resigned only to return so many times it is genuinely difficult to keep count, and of course then went on to form the Brexit Party and latterly Reform UK. He is portrayed as a veritable ‘force of nature’

who bizarrely couples a genuine talent for communication with a profound difficulty in working with other people.

His ultimate legacy is Brexit of course, though while Crick doesn’t underplay the role of Johnson, Gove, Cummings and their ilk in this, he does rather underplay the role of the tabloid press, who arguably enjoyed their last hurrah in promoting the greatest irrelevance ever purveyed to the British working class. And all with the help of arriviste businessmen and hedge fund managers who bankrolled the operation both before and after the 2016 referendum. Crick outlines how this campaign then paved the way for the 2019 General Election, the collapse of Labour’s ‘Red Wall’ and the eventual UK withdrawal from the EU. Crick says:

‘For a hundred years the Labour Party had depended on class loyalty. People voted Labour because they’d always voted Labour, and their families and friends all voted Labour too... In the 2016 referendum, Labour officially urged people to vote Remain, yet in hundreds of traditional working-class Labour seats, especially in the Midlands and the North, Labour supporters and trade unionists voted emphatically to leave the EU. The 2016 referendum burst the rising dam of resentment in such places that Labour no longer delivered for poor people like them with insecure, lowly paid jobs, and that under Blair, Miliband and Corbyn, Labour had become just another London party for wealthy middle-class types who’d gone to university’ (p.547).

In some ways, it’s difficult to disagree and Farage’s Brexit Party rubbed salt in this wound. But for what? Crick argues that part of Farage’s legacy is that it may be difficult for the Labour Party to ever form a government on its own again. But as people are now discovering with a likely pending recession (according to the Bank of England) and because Brexit has helped propel price rises to their greatest rate in decades, Brexit was just another illusion as a supposed solution to people’s problems. In fact, not only wasn’t it the answer, it wasn’t even asking the right question.

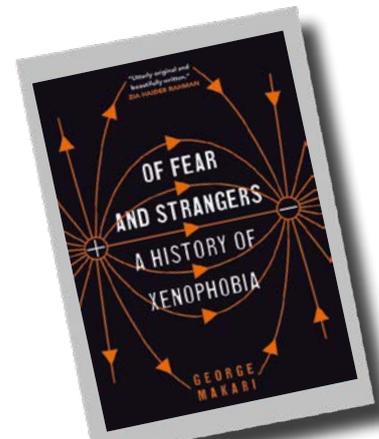
Farage was a key player in creating one of the biggest political apparitions of the last century and as time passes this is likely to become clearer. As a result, what seems like a career that had a massive impact now (Crick rates him as one of the five most significant political leaders of the last 50 years) might look rather differently when those voters in the Red Wall seats notice their lives haven’t actually changed for the better after all. Meanwhile, both UKIP and Reform UK have struggled to find a new purpose and given the political trajectories of both Northern Ireland and

Scotland currently, it might not be too long before one of the greatest political ironies of all time emerges when UKIP has to rename itself ‘EWIP’.

Farage is currently marooned at GB News, which ever more seems to exist as being purely and simply his very own ‘news’ channel. Here he continues his rather repulsive dalliance with fellow egomaniac Donald Trump together with his campaign against men in little boats crossing the channel at great peril, effectively an unwanted latter-day Dunkirk without white faces. A man of the people until the end, clearly.

DAP

Racism and Hostility



George Makari: Of Fear and Strangers: a History of Xenophobia.
Yale University Press £20.

The word xenophobia may sound as if it is from Classical Greek, but in fact it is much more recent. It dates from the 1880s, as a psychiatric condition (pathological fear of strangers) and a term for irrational enmity towards other nations, with terms such as Francophobia found. But its real use for dislike of ‘foreigners’ dates from the 1900 Boxer Uprising in China, after invasions by various European colonial powers led to a resistance movement which included the slogan ‘destroy the foreigners’. It was thus employed to explain why people living in Asia or Africa might hate Western armies and colonialists.

A so-called racial science was developed, which inter alia claimed that ‘primitive races’ saw all outsiders and strangers as enemies. This licensed violence against those who evinced such hatred. But, as George Makari shows here, this position was gradually undermined. Reports such as Roger Casement’s on Belgian atrocities in the Congo, together with many other examples of colonial murders and forced labour, made it clear that Western behaviour and attitudes were to blame:

'Their wild and primitive xenophobic rejection of us was actually our violent dehumanization of them.' Immigrants to the West, such as Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia, encountered xenophobia from organisations like the British Brothers' League, which at the start of the last century wanted to halt immigration by 'destitute foreigners'.

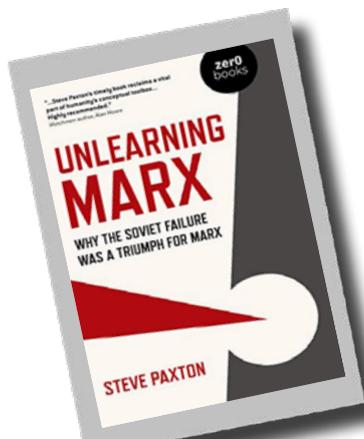
In the 1930s there was a 'general panic' in Europe against migrants, and Nazi policies had been foreshadowed in many ways by earlier colonial conquest and domination. Their killings of Jews and others seemed to go beyond 'just' xenophobia, and the term genocide was coined in 1944 to describe the intent to destroy a human identity.

Makari provides a full and detailed account of how xenophobia and other racist views have been used to justify mass killings, slavery and so on. The second half of the book, which examines the ideas of psychologists and writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, is less interesting, but the final section has a useful discussion of the return of xenophobia, especially since 2016, as witness Brexit and Trump. It cannot be explained simply as due to economic problems or 'cultural preservation'. Perhaps more extensive discussion of populist politics would have been helpful here.

It is sometimes argued that it is just part of human nature to distrust strangers or outsiders, who are not part of some in-group and so threaten 'us' and need to be driven off. But Makari cites the research of various writers who have argued that restraining aggression had advantages for survival and so led to bands of humans becoming larger, safer and not living in constant fear.

PB

Marx was right



Unlearning Marx. Why the Soviet Failure was a Triumph for Marx.
By Steve Paxton,
Zero Books, 2021. 165pp.

The thesis of this interesting book is that the failure of the Bolsheviks to establish a socialist society in Russia following the 1917 revolution shows the correctness of Marx's contention that such a society can only arise from advanced capitalism. And since Russia was not an advanced capitalist society in 1917, it could not 'jump' the capitalist stage and go straight to socialism. This is not of course a new argument. In fact, it's one of the arguments against Bolshevism posing as socialism that appeared in the Socialist Standard in the period immediately following the Russian revolution. Those early members of the Socialist Party were clear that, whatever was happening in Russia, it wasn't and couldn't be socialism. But this book has the merit of going to extensively researched lengths to prove beyond any conceivable doubt not only that Russia was massively backward in terms of capitalist development in 1917 but probably more so than has previously been thought. To do this it goes into enormous detail on economic developments in Russia throughout the 19th century and right up to the revolution, often comparing these to what was happening in Western Europe and in particular in the motor of capitalist development that was England. Such detail is used to demonstrate conclusively 'the failure of capitalist production to penetrate the lives of the mass of ordinary Russian producers' and so the inevitably premature nature of the seizure of power by Lenin and the Bolsheviks 'in the name of the proletariat'.

The author follows this by discussion, again highly detailed and documented, of how the Russian economy was built up by the Bolsheviks after the post-revolution period of 'War Communism' (1917-22), first under Lenin and then under Stalin, often of course with unbridled violence and brutality inflicted on much of the population. And far from being the development of 'socialism' or 'communism' as the regime presented it, he sees this period as representing the transition stage from feudalism to capitalism that Western Europe had undergone earlier and much more gradually over a period of several centuries. He rejects too the idea that what Russia had during this period was 'state capitalism', on the grounds that capitalism was not sufficiently developed there for that name to be attached to it (more like 'state feudalism' at least at the beginning, he suggests). And indeed he argues that capitalism didn't in fact come to Russia until the end of the Soviet Union in 1989 when the Soviet system reached peak 'stagnation'. This is debatable as before then Russia had all the typical features of capitalism – a money economy, wage labour, capital investment, buying and selling, a small privileged class in control (in this case Party bosses and bureaucrats) and in effect ownership of the means of

production, and a large mass of workers with no control over the means of living.

His book also presents the opportunity for the author to effectively put to bed common misrepresentations of Marx and his ideas. He does this, in the sections that focus on it, in a highly readable and credible way. So, far from the collapse of the Soviet Union being 'a fatal blow to important Marxian theses', he makes it clear that 'Marx specifically predicted that projects like the Soviet Union would fail' and that such an outcome does not in any way mean that 'socialism has been tried and found wanting'. A further merit of this book is the nuanced discussion of class to be found in the section entitled 'Deeper into Marx' which recognises that a relatively small number of exceptions to the Marxian model of the class divide between those who own and control the means of production and those who have to work for a wage or salary to survive may blur the overall picture, but at the same time makes short shrift of the idea of a large number of classes in capitalist society and correctly sees the key to class not in whether someone actually works for a wage or salary but the 'economic pressure' on that person, i.e. whether that person has to work in order to survive or can choose not to if they want.

The book's short concluding chapter which looks to the future is also encouraging. Using Marx's theory of historical development (historical materialism) as a framework, as the writer has done throughout the book, it states tellingly of capitalism that 'it has provided the means to produce more and better and faster', that it has developed 'technology to the point where we can produce the material abundance required by a free society' and that 'the level of technological development it has delivered means that we have now entered a post-scarcity world'. Yet, as he points out, 'Twenty thousand people starve to death every day. Not because we don't have the food to feed them – but because our current economic and social mechanisms don't allow us to deliver that food to them.' At the same time, he sees no virtue in violent revolution: 'We are not going to progress past capitalism by seizing the means of production in armed conflict.' Nothing here that socialists can disagree with, but this reader was left a little bemused by the remedy proposed, as a way of organising our 'post scarcity world', consisting as it does of 'new approaches to the relationships between work and leisure, between work and reward, between possession and ownership and between private property and public value' and not a democratic system of free access to all goods and services.

HOWARD MOSS

May News Review: At Home



THE RAILWAY wages dispute continued during the merry month of May, providing the government with evidence that their anti-union laws have little hope of working differently from similar laws in America, where it was found that "cooling off" periods, compulsory ballots and the rest only made the strikers more solidly determined than ever. Railway workers are struggling to win back some of the standard of living they have lost over recent years. This is a pretty typical affair, since the class divided nature of capitalism must throw up class disputes about the division of wealth. No law will

ever change that; governments, as well as unions, have to make the best of it they can. Meanwhile, the current dispute in the docks, which is costing the Transport Workers' union £55,000 in fines up to now, showed up the confusions and limitations of trade union action. The dockers have been refusing to handle lorries carrying containers which had been packed in inland depots by non-dock labour. This arrangement was precisely one of the main motives behind the massive capital investment in container ships, docks and traffic—to reduce the loading time of ships in the docks, where the dockers were so powerful. But the dockers' efforts to keep up their position of strength has

met with opposition from the workers who do the loading at the depots and from the drivers who deliver the containers—members, in fact, of the same union as the dockers. All the workers involved in this dispute would do well to realise that there is no advantage in struggling against other workers. The only worthwhile battle is against the capitalist class, over not a share of the wealth the workers produce but all of it.

(Socialist Standard, June 1972)

Party News

PARTY NEWS: LOCAL ELECTION RESULT

WE MADE no apology for raising the nature of the present world economic system – capitalism – in a local election. Local councils have to run things inside the framework of capitalism and that restricts what they can do. They are also restricted in that most of their money comes from central government.

The priority under capitalism is profit-making. Having to respect this priority means that what the central government can make available for local social services and amenities takes second place. That's why they are never as good as they should be, in spite of the efforts and promises of the other parties. Capitalism simply

cannot be made to work for the benefit of all. Only a society based on the common ownership and democratic control of productive resources can do that.

The results in the two wards we contested were:

Lambeth, Clapham East ward (2 members): Leigh (Lab) 1,127; Collins (Lab) 1,073; Hattersley (Green) 411; Williams (LD) 224; Freeman (Con) 215; Hindson (Con) 193; Cranney (TUSC) 38; Lambert (Socialist) 31.

Tunbridge Wells, Pantiles & St Mark's ward: Barras (LD) 1386; Delman (Con) 715; Hurst (Green) 132; Blackmore (Lab) 130; Kennedy (Socialist) 11.

Obituary

Matt Culbert

IT IS with great sorrow that Edinburgh Branch has to report the passing of a long-time and active member of the Party, Matt Culbert.

Matt first joined the Party's Glasgow Branch on the 12th June 1972 and soon became an avid attendee of its lively outdoor meetings. Due to personal problems, Matt was lapsed but re-joined in 1995.

In many ways Matt was an archetypal member of the Party, busy promoting the case for socialism but also engaging in trade union activity as a shop steward representing predominantly women members, challenging the sexual discrimination and craft outlook of the engineering union with its demarcation lines. This perhaps was what led to him also participating for a time in the Industrial Workers of the World.

Matt left Glasgow to relocate in Livingston, on the outskirts of Edinburgh, transferring his enthusiasm and energy to re-building and bolstering the branch, as well as organising discussion meetings. Matt readily offered himself up as candidate for various Westminster and Holyrood elections, as well as attending innumerable political rallies to leaflet and sell the *Socialist Standard*.

When the internet replaced the forums of the street meetings, Matt eagerly launched himself into creating a Party web presence, using his self-taught computer skills to assist in the Internet and Blog Committees and more recently replying to questions pertaining to socialism posed on the Quora website.

In addition to his dedication to the Party, Matt had wider interests other than politics and was particularly devoted to reading poetry and listening to music despite hearing difficulties that led to him being a proficient lip-reader.

We offer our deepest condolences to Matt's partner.

EDINBURGH BRANCH

World Socialist Movement Online Meetings

To join Discord contact the
Administrator on
spbg.discord@worldsocialism.org.

JUNE 2022 EVENTS

World Socialist Movement online meetings

Sundays at 19.30 (IST) Discord
Weekly WSP (India) meeting

Sunday 5 June 11.00 GMT + 1

There will be no Central Branch Zoom meeting this month

Friday 3 June 19.30 GMT +1 Discord

Discussion: **Monarchy – Feudal Relic or Capitalist
Figurehead?**

Friday 10 June 19.30 GMT
+ 1 Discord

Did You See the News?

General current affairs discussion

Friday 17 June 19.30 GMT + 1

The Cost of Living Crisis

Discussion on the eve of the TUC
demonstration

Sunday 26 June 11.00 GMT
+ 1 Discord

Regular last Sunday of the month
Discussion meeting



Socialist Party Physical Meetings

Saturday 18 June, 2pm

'The Ideas of Rutger Bregman'

Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester M2 5NS

Saturday 25 June 3pm

What is Human Nature?

Speaker: Richard Field

Head Office, 52 Clapham High St, London SW4 7UN
(After South & West London branch meeting at 2pm)

Cardiff: Every Saturday 1pm-3pm (weather permitting)

Street Stall, Capitol Shopping Centre, Queen Street
(Newport Road end).

Glasgow: Second Saturday of each month

at The Atholl Arms Pub, 134 Renfrew St,
G2 3AU Let's get together for a beer and
a blether. 2pm onwards. 2 minutes walk
from Buchanan Street Bus Station. For
further information call Paul Edwards
on 07484 717893.

**Yorkshire: Discussion group meets
monthly** either on Zoom or physical

meetings. Further information:
fredi.edwards@hotmail.co.uk

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 for producing and distributing wealth 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 capitalist 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.

The Climate Campaigner

'CLIMATE CHAOS' was the title of a leaflet I was handed in the main shopping centre of the town I live in. I was given it by a young woman who was also keen to engage me in conversation and let me know about the purpose of the leaflet and the group of people she was part of who were using a loudhailer to put their point across to passers-by.

She told me that fossil fuels were polluting the environment and were the main cause of climate change and the best thing I could do was to get involved in her group's cause and spread their arguments among the local community. The group was Extinction Rebellion (XR) Cymru.

Barclays and the government

I said I found it admirable that a group of young people cared enough about the state of the world to dedicate their time and energy in trying and improve it, but I wondered whether they were on quite the right track. She asked me what I meant and I pointed to a couple of the things I'd seen in the leaflet, in particular the statement that 'government and Barclays are both criminally responsible for destroying our future'. I asked her how she thought that different policies by either could really make a significant difference to pollution and climate change.

This could happen in two ways, she said. Firstly Barclays could stop investing in fossil fuels, since they were, in the words of the leaflet, 'knowingly destroying the world that we depend on'. Secondly the government could 'use our taxes to create a sustainable future' and get HMRC to 'stop banking with Barclays and use an ethical bank'.

I told her I understood the group's objectives and appreciated their determination to get XR's message across in such a public way. But I also asked her whether she didn't think that, even if they succeeded in putting enough pressure on the government and Barclays to get them to change

their environmental policies, it would be more than just a drop on the ocean and do much to change the basic situation of ever increasing degradation of the eco-system.

A different take

I could tell by the look on her face that this didn't please her and her rather sharp response was to ask me what I was doing about it. This was unexpectedly good for me, because it gave me the opportunity to say what I wanted to say but was worried that, if I simply came out with it unsolicited, it might seem preachy or dismissive of her efforts. And I didn't want to have that effect, since then she probably wouldn't listen to me seriously.

So as briefly and in as broad brush a way as possible, I tried to outline the position that the Socialist Party takes on the environment and climate change. I suggested that it wasn't a freestanding problem but one of a whole range of problems that the profit-driven society we live in creates, meaning that even if we managed to alleviate one of those problems piecemeal, we would not actually solve it (since the need for economic expansion and profit would remain key) and anyway all the other problems implicit in the system (eg poverty, inequality, war, alienation) would remain and continue to torment us. I went on to say that I do my best to communicate to my fellow-workers, people just like herself, instead of trying to change bits of the current system, to unite together to bring in a completely different kind of world society, based on voluntary work, democratic decision-making and free access to all goods and services – so no money or wages, no buying and selling, no leaders or led, no borders or frontiers. And with a final flourish, I announced that this would only

be possible once a majority of us wanted it and were prepared to take democratic action to bring it about.

Baby steps

I didn't know quite what to expect as a response, so I was relieved to find her nodding and saying something like 'sounds good, but... but it's a long way off and we've got to do something in the meantime'. So, though I was pleased that any hostility seemed to have melted away, her stock 'in the meantime' response was still a barrier which I knew I wasn't going to be able to overcome in a short discussion, especially as she was now going to want to give out more leaflets and speak to more people. It didn't seem right to try to detain her either, but I could at least hope that, having implanted a new idea in her mind, once the day's leafleting and campaigning had finished, she might reflect on that idea and wonder whether it wasn't worth considering further.

I would have liked to have had a *Socialist Standard* with me to give her but I didn't. However, I'd mentioned the name of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, so that might stick in her mind and maybe, who knows, bring her to the Party's website? And I was encouraged that her parting shot was that she understood what I was saying and realised that what XR were advocating was only 'baby steps', but it was surely better than nothing and she didn't see that their aims and the Socialist Party's were incompatible. I didn't think it was a good idea to disagree with that, even though what I would have liked to say was that it was worth thinking about whether XR's aims, even in the unlikely

event they were fulfilled within the current system, would bring us any nearer to the establishment of a socialist world which was the only feasible way to ensure the survival and indeed the flourishing of the natural environment and of all its living creatures.

HOWARD MOSS

