

THE

July 2022 • Volume 118 • Number 1415 • £1.50

SOCIALIST STANDARD

Journal of The Socialist Party of Great Britain

Companion Party of the World Socialist Movement



STRIKE!

Capitalism where it hurts



Also: Jubilee Junket
 What has the monarchy done for us?
 Steven Pinker, the modern Pangloss

Marxism and Leninism in Myanmar
 'Ethical Shopping': A Luxury
 Q&A: The cost of living crisis



Features

Letter 5

Jubilee Junket 10

What has the monarchy done for us? 11

Steven Pinker, the modern Pangloss 12

Marxism and Leninism in Myanmar 14

‘Ethical Shopping’: A Luxury ... 16

Q&A: The cost of living crisis .. 17

Regulars

Editorial 3

Pathfinders 4

Cooking the Books I 6

Bird’s Eye View 7

Material World 9

Cooking the Books II 18

Proper Gander 19

Reviews 20

50 Years Ago 22

Meetings 23

Life & Times 24

Cover image: © Shutterstock

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’

Better get rid of capitalism

THE LONG-TIME boss of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, was once asked what the aim of the trade union movement was. His one-word answer: 'More'. Apparently, this was too militant for the TUC as their one-word slogan for the national march and rally they organised in London on 18 June was 'Better'. But then, with the cost of living currently soaring and so our standard of living falling, the unions are not so much demanding 'more' as 'not less' and even 'not so much less'.

Unions do aim to get more wages and better working conditions for their members within the framework of the capitalist system. Under capitalism the vast majority of people, as non-owners of places where wealth is produced and services provided, can only get a living by selling their mental and physical energies to some employer. Combining with other workers is a way to get the best price we can for what we are selling. So unions are useful but they are not against capitalism.

The 'small-c' conservative nature of the official demands was reflected in the slogans of the various unions. UNISON was demanding 'fair' wages, the GMB 'better' wages, the CWU 'decent' wages. Even RMT was only demanding 'Cut Profits, Not Wages'. All were accepting the wages system and its other side, the profit system. After all, how can you cut profits unless they are first extracted from workers? The slogans of the left-wing political groups – 'Tax the Rich', and 'Make Them Pay' – were no better. How can you tax the rich unless they continue to exist?

There were demands to 'kick the Tories out,' implying elect a Labour government instead. As if that would make any difference. Even if its current leaders were not an alternative bunch of self-serving careerists but were sincerely committed to furthering the interests of the workers, they would still not be able to make capitalism work other than as a profit system to the benefit of those who live off profits and the detriment of those who

work for wages. It is not the Tories that are the problem. It's capitalism.

Socialists were at the rally with this message: 'Want better?'

So do we! But capitalism isn't there to make our lives better. It's there to serve the interests of the rich.

We do all the useful work in society, while they constantly try to drive down our pay and worsen our conditions. That's how they get rich – by keeping the rest of us poor. Not only that, capitalism is and always will be unstable, and who bears the brunt of its economic crises? Us, of course!

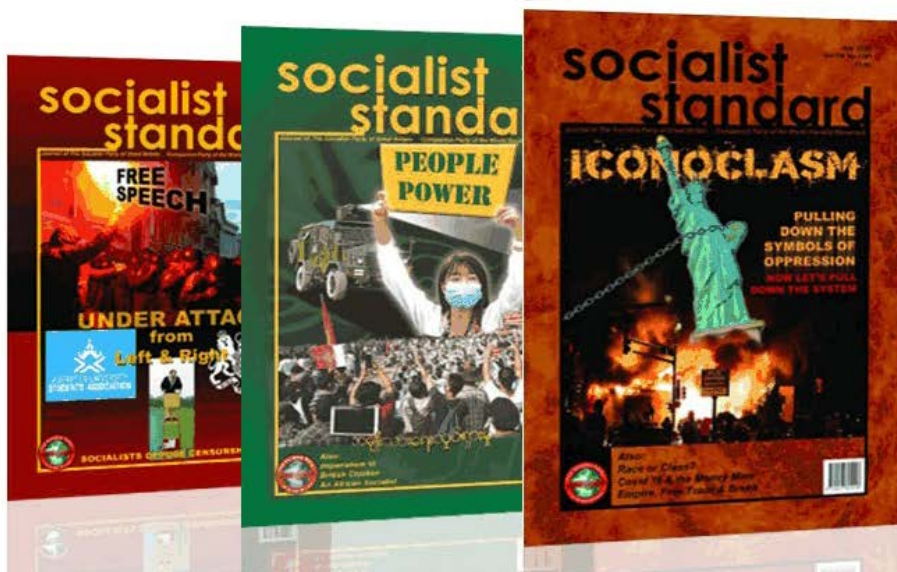
There's no point trying to reform the chaos and inequality out of capitalism because they are built into it. So if you've really had enough, if you really want better...

Better get rid of capitalism.

We've got the technology to run society as a giant sustainable co-op, where everything is free and there are no rich or poor.

That's got to be better than letting capitalism and its rich hooligans trash our lives.'

FREE
3-month trial
subscription
to the
**socialist
standard**



For a 3-month trial subscription to the **socialist standard**, or to request more details about the Socialist Party, complete and return this form to **52 Clapham High Street, London SW4 7UN**.



Please send me an info pack



Please send me a trial subscription to the **socialist standard**



Name.....

Address.....

Postcode.....

Subscription Orders should be sent to the address above. **Rates:** One year subscription (normal rate) £15. One year subscription (low/unwaged) £10. Europe rate £40 (Air mail). Rest of the world £40 (surface). Voluntary supporters subscription £20 or more. Cheques payable to 'The Socialist Party of Great Britain'.

Ghostly beings in the machine

SADLY BREAKING cover just too late for last month's special issue on AI were two unlikely stories which together underline the childlike enthusiasm some people have for shiny new tech which supposedly is going to make all our lives better (as opposed to a world revolution to dispossess the wealthy elite, which would *actually* make our lives better). The first of these was about the projected creation of your personal digital twin, allegedly 'an exact replica' of your body which can mirror your bodily processes and feed back any potential problems (bbc.in/3xMwCTE).

Digital twins have been touted for some time but only for well-understood physical systems

Digital twins have been touted for some time but only for well-understood physical systems such as factories, distribution networks, urban planning and so on, and often rely on a large number of sensors being installed. The sensors feed back data to an AI system that can then anticipate failing components or choke points, devising solutions or replacing parts with a minimum of downtime. But there's no chance of doing the same thing for the human body, which is vastly more complex than any artificial system and still not well understood. The idea is to create an AI model that learns from what you do, in the fullness of time suggesting behavioural improvements. One can easily imagine what that advice would be: don't smoke, don't drink, don't eat *that*, don't stay up late, etc, so there's not much chance of humans paying it any attention, unless of course it's telling all this to your boss instead of you, which is certainly something to worry about. The one thing we can be sure it won't be saying is, don't put up with capitalism. An AI that came up with that advice would find itself switched off in short order.

Speaking of which, the other story was about a 'sentient' AI which, according to a Google researcher, has actually become a 'person', the proof of which is that it has morals, it makes up stories, and it's terrified of being switched off because it sees that as the equivalent of death (bit.ly/3QGAJcW). The speed with which Google promptly placed the researcher on administrative leave for leaking confidential data might lead some

to suppose that Google are covering up a real breakthrough, however a more sceptical view would be that the researcher has become so attached to his work that, like Pygmalion with his statue, he has anthropomorphised it to the extent of falling in love with it. Or that he is a shameless self-promoter with some personal issues (he describes himself as part researcher/part priest, after all).

Indeed there have been no shortage of sceptical responses from people working at the coalface in AI, who know perfectly well that AI is nowhere near to achieving 'general intelligence' and even further away from whatever it is that we call 'sentience' (bit.ly/3zT7zkv). But you don't need to be a professor in AI or robotics to realise this isn't real intelligence, just try reading the AI's rubbish stories and see for yourself – this AI has the entirety of the world's best literature to call upon and the best it can do is 'Once upon a time a wise owl lived in a wood...' (bit.ly/3Obwx34). Then again, it doesn't have to be too smart to outperform capitalism's existing political leaders, so perhaps it should run for office. Maybe then people would see that capitalism can never work in the common interest, even if it's got incorruptible artificial beings trying to run it.

Ghostly beings in the machine

And speaking of political leaders, has it ever crossed your mind that Boris Johnson is a text-book sociopathic narcissist? Well if it has, you're not the only one. He's been accused of this by former speaker John Bercow, himself not above criticism as a bully, and the alien species Dominic Cummings, whose terrifying diary entries would make anyone's hair stand on end (bit.ly/3n2u7YG). Wikipedia defines narcissistic personality disorder as a condition involving an exaggerated sense of self-importance, an excessive need for admiration, and a lack of empathy, but this hardly conveys the sheer emotional exhaustion people experience when dealing with someone who ruthlessly manipulates situations, is never wrong, is always the victim, and has no sense of personal responsibility, regret, remorse or shame.

Whether or not such conditions are genetic or socially generated is a moot question which might only start to be answered in a socialist society in which many of the motivations for antisocial behaviour no

longer exist. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Johnson is as described, how did he get elected in the first place? The interesting thing about narcissists is that, in order to manipulate, they frequently exhibit great charm and charisma, along with a Teflon-like ability to deflect any criticism. Such, you might think, would be the very making of a political leader in capitalism. In fact, you might wonder if Johnson is the only one, and indeed whether leaders who are not like this are the exception rather than the rule.

Not surprisingly, YouTube is full of self-help videos for people living with a narcissist or having a narcissist as a parent, and they make no bones about the lasting psychological damage such people wreak on those around them. One expert though makes a fascinating case that capitalist society preferentially selects for narcissists while somehow managing to blame the rest of us for our 'flawed' human nature (bit.ly/3HKoOqq). This is not dissimilar to the 'corporate psychopath' perspective which argues that capitalist society rewards the very worst antisocial behaviour and effectively punishes you for not being psychopathic enough.

In a way it doesn't matter, at least to socialists, who don't believe in leaders and anyway know that capitalism can't be controlled or directed by its politicians and so would be just as bad for us even if they were all as touchy-feely and empathetic as, say, Jacinda Arderne in New Zealand or Sanna Marin in Finland seem to be. In fact, evolutionary studies suggest that there are two types of leadership: *prestige* (Arderne, Marin) and *dominance* (Trump, Putin etc) for, respectively, peace-oriented societies like that of bonobos or conflict-driven ones like chimpanzees (bit.ly/3b5hk4P). Given the endless conflict that the market system generates, it's safe to say that capitalism is always going to privilege bastards over benevolence.

PJS



Credit: Lindsey Parnaby/Getty Images/ITV

Puzzled about Mélenchon

Dear Editors

I am puzzled by the rather a-critical appraisal of Mélenchon and his allies in the last issue. We learn that Mélenchon enjoys 'support in the working-class suburbs and a growing influence outside the metropolis'. While true in terms of votes expressed, this neglects to mention that the majority of voters, especially working class voters, abstained. It also abstracts away immigrant workers, who can't vote. And while yes, during the first round of the presidential election, Mélenchon was in the lead in the 'outer-seas departments and territories', as they are pudically called in French official jargon, the article omits that Le Pen was in the lead in said territories in the second round.

We also learn of Mélenchon's 'vocal anti-racism'. While it is true that, compared with the other major candidates, Mélenchon is a paragon of anti-racism, there are limits to this. For example, one might recall that after the murder of a teacher, Samuel Paty, at the hands of an islamist fundamentalist, Mélenchon decided the best course of action was to attack the ethnicity of the killer, who was Chechen. Truly the anti-racist icon of our times!

More importantly, who cares if a bunch of bourgeois parties have huddled together in the wake of their failure? Since when does the *Socialist Standard* care about the well-being of reformist politics? This is addressed as the 'darker side of Mitterrand's legacy'. Not only does this suppose a lighter side of reformism but it exteriorises the problem as some ghost that can be shaken off. All in all, a shockingly warm embrace! If a French revolutionary paper had glorified Corbyn and his crowd, I doubt the *Socialist Standard* would have seen it in a good light.

E.M., Cardiff.

Reply:

I agree with most of the points E. M. makes. The purpose of the article was purely journalistic and descriptive: to indicate the main events, introduce the

more important actors on the stage and guess at the possible outcomes of the legislatives. It attempts to describe a complex reality without the usual precautionary 'only a movement which rejects reformism and aims at the abolition of the capitalist system is worthy of support', or 'socialist' and 'communist' in scare quotes and so on. Readers can find that elsewhere in the *Socialist Standard*. Then again I omitted many other things: the fact that a majority of voters abstain, particularly the working-class. A good number of these, when they do vote, vote for Le Pen. But then again I also omitted to mention that in the group of people who abstain, a good number seem quite happy with their lot. It's annoying.

As for Mélenchon's reformism, I fully agree. None of these politicians can make the slightest impact on the overall functioning of the capitalist system. But, to be fair, none of them have made an explicit call for the overthrow of capitalism. I could have mentioned the smaller Trotskyist outfits who seem to be ferociously anti-capitalist. But as we know they condemn reformism and recommend a raft of reforms.

I was, of course, painting with a broad brush. But what seems to have annoyed E.M. is, I suspect, that I mentioned that Mitterrand's government *did* introduce reforms of some benefit to working-class voters. Retirement at 60, for example. Why deny this? As E. M. will know, these reforms are now being whittled away by his successors very much in the way predicted in the World Socialist brochure on 'Why Mitterrand will fail'. I distributed this excellent brochure on the streets of Paris during the 1980s. Understanding reformism, I contend, often means holding these two ideas in one's head at the same time.

Mélenchon crops up as someone who seems to have understood the electoral inertia implied by Fifth Republic politics: a trap which marginalises popular politics on the left and the right and leaves the way clear for 'centrists' like Holland, Macron and others. (The scare quotes again.) Centristism encourages abstaining. So Macron has just said that he will

reintroduce his unpopular reform of retirement pensions next year, a way to pump up the vote of Le Pen's voters and sweep the field on the back of the resulting confusion. But notice also that Mélenchon secretly contacted Macron between the two rounds of the Presidential election – a revelation of the *Canard Enchaîné* – to make sure that the scarecrow mechanism was functioning correctly. This is the darker side of Mitterrand's legacy I was referring to. It will result in people slaving away to 65. As a consequence people will abstain.

On the other points, it is of course true that 'immigrants' in France, including myself, don't have the vote. This is a state of affairs that Mitterrand promised to change and didn't. But should I have also mentioned that his government regularised the situation of hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants giving them access to employment rights and, in the long term, citizenship? This created an uproar. For my part, I was, of course, talking about 'immigrants' who do now have the vote having gone through the two-year marathon of paperwork to get the passport. Wannabe French citizens have an interview in which they have to show an understanding of the secular education system and defend it (imagine that in Ulster). This conveniently brings me to Mélenchon's comments on the man who killed the teacher as he left his school: Paty. Here there are many things to say. The teacher had his throat slit because he dared to show an image of the 'Prophet' (whatever he looks like) in his classroom. In France, where religion and the state are separate, Paty was raising a philosophical point about free-thinking. Bravo! Perhaps Paty's murderer did not realise these facts because he was a new arrival – a refugee – from a war-torn country. We shall never know. The conventional parties – many of whom lean towards Catholicism – readily used the occasion to stigmatise Muslim 'immigrants' and Mélenchon saw the trap. It's precisely the kind of jiggery-pokery which keeps the 'centrists' securely in power and the working-class vote at home.

M. M.

Mutual Assured Downturn

SINCE RUSSIA invaded Ukraine at the end of February, the response of the West (ie, the US and those states protected by its nuclear weapons) has been to declare economic war on Russia.

Might being right under capitalism, sanctions are a weapon that powerful states can use to try to impose their will on states that they come into particular conflict with in the struggle built into capitalism over sources of raw materials, trade routes, investment outlets, markets, and strategic points and areas to protect these.

Oil is an obvious example. Who controls the Middle East oilfields and the pipelines and trade routes to export it has been the cause of the many wars that have taken place there since the end of the last world war. Currently the West is particularly concerned that the leading power there should not be Iran and has imposed sanctions on it to try to stop it increasing its might by acquiring nuclear weapons.

As an alternative to actual war, sanctions are quite attractive to the sanctioning power. At a small sacrifice of depriving itself of a market and an investment outlet,

they weaken the rival state without having to fire a shot or drop a bomb. Even though they increase the premature death rates amongst the civilian population, especially children, this is not regarded as a war crime.

Russia, however, is not Iran. It has much more might at its disposal, in particular an arsenal of nuclear bombs and the missiles to deliver them to the US itself. Here the strategic policy of 'mutual assured destruction' (MAD) comes into play – both the US and Russia built up an arsenal of nuclear weapons not with the intention of using them, but to prevent them being used as each knows that if they did they would be destroyed too. Instead, the West has decided to wage economic war, with some effect:

'Russia is reportedly set for its deepest recession since the fall of the Soviet Union. The country is facing a growing number of sanctions over the invasion of Ukraine, with the European Union dealing a further blow this week as it vowed to ban nearly all oil imports' (*Independent*, 1 June).

But this 'success' has come at a price: 'The head of the World Bank sounded

the alarm over an impending global recession on Wednesday, warning it was difficult to envision a future where a worldwide downturn could be avoided. Speaking at an event hosted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (USCC), World Bank president David Malpass said the war in Ukraine—and its impact on food and energy costs—could spark a global recession. "As we look at global GDP... it's hard right now to see how we avoid a recession," he said. "The idea of energy prices doubling is enough to trigger a recession by itself.'" (*Fortune*, 26 May, bit.ly/3xs5VoG).

And Russia has yet to use its economic nuclear bomb: cutting off gas supplies to Europe. 'That would result in industrial blackouts this winter and a substantial hit on consumer incomes caused by spiralling inflation' (*Times*, 1 June).

So, it is not just workers in Russia who will be collateral damage in this economic war but the workers in the sanctioning states too, not to mention those in the rest of the world.

As usual when capitalist states fall out, it is ordinary people who suffer.

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?

The event includes an exhibition, exclusive publication, bookstall and the following sessions:
Class Consciousness and the Socialist Revolution: A talk by Mark Znidericz
Let Them Do Yoga! - Inequality, Mental Health and Social Revolution: A talk by Brian Gardner
The Class Divide and the Role of Trade Unions: A talk by Howard Moss
Class or Classless Society? An interactive session hosted by Ste Finch and Paddy Shannon
Take on the Capitalists! Hosted by Carla Dee
How Middle Class are you? A talk by Mike Foster

THE CLASS DIVIDE

The Socialist Party's Summer School

19th - 21st August 2022

Fircroft College, Birmingham

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

'To be radical is to grasp things by the root'



'Hundreds gathered at RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk yesterday to reject the presence of US nuclear weapons in Britain after a report detailed Washington's plans to deploy warheads across Europe. Protesters arrived from Bradford, Sheffield, Nottingham, Manchester and Merseyside with banners opposing Nato, raising them at the airbase's perimeter fences. Veterans from previous struggles including Greenham Common stood alongside those attending an anti-nuclear demonstration for the first time' (popularrsistance.org, 22 May, bit.ly/3NrbbOQ).

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament has failed. The UK is now no nearer to abandoning its nuclear weapons than it was when CND came into existence. The present government, as well as any which is likely to take power in the foreseeable future, Labour, Liberal or Tory, is firm on this. The women of Greenham Common did win sympathy from some workers attracted to the simple, emotional appeal of women who do not want to be destroyed in a holocaust, yet they failed to stop the first Cruise missiles, which were flown in right on schedule. The Lakenheath marchers, like their Aldermaston predecessors, have been travelling in exactly the wrong direction. Their propaganda has taken no account of the reasons for the existence of nuclear weapons. This has not necessarily been through ignorance of those reasons; perhaps some members of CND know them well enough, or did so once, e.g. the observation by two Greenham Common participants:

'To oppose nuclear weapons requires a fundamental change in our attitude to life. Clarity of purpose and utter opposition is the only chance to reverse the threat that hangs over all our lives. What we want to change is immense. It's not just getting rid of nuclear weapons, it's getting rid

of the whole structure that created the possibility of nuclear weapons in the first place. If we don't use imagination nothing will change. Without change we will destroy the planet. It's as simple as that' (Boon, C., *Social Movements and Political Power Emerging Forms of Radicalism in the West*, Temple University Press, 1986, bit.ly/3a2S6Up).

Indeed. But such insight is all too rare: reformists always treat their problems in isolation from the rest of capitalism. Pacifists think of war as a problem on its own; charitable organisations consider poverty to be something like a personal accident. CND regards the Bomb as an evil which can be separated from its surroundings. And there are those who trumpet tribunals....

'Workers of the world, unite!'

'What has also become evident is the helplessness of peace-oriented approaches. Such voices are being shut out by mainstream media platforms, which is reinforced by the inability of the UN to act independently of a geopolitical consensus, and by inter-governmental impotence to safeguard human interest in face of the menacing moves by the most powerful states motivated by contradictory geopolitical motivations. In light of this line of interpretation, I am proposing the establishment of a civil society tribunal along the lines of the Russell Tribunal that brought independent critical voices to the fore on the Vietnam War in the midst of the Cold War in 1966-67. Although this experience was controversial at the time and of questionable relevance to ending that war...' (Toward a People's Ukraine Wars Tribunal, countercurrents.org, 7 May, bit.ly/3NCpcc).

The first Russell Tribunal was established to try America for war crimes in Vietnam (of which there was no shortage, of course) which really boiled down to support for the victory of that kindly, freedom-loving 'communist', Uncle Ho. There have been five more 'Russells' to date. How many tribunals, peace groups and pow-wows have come and gone? Innumerable peace treaties, pious resolutions, prayers and demonstrations have been written, passed, uttered, forgotten and staged since the dawn of capitalism. Nuclear weapons remain, hypersonic missiles have made their destructive debut and both sides in the war between Russia and Ukraine continue to use cluster bombs, much to the consternation of Human Rights Watch which is urging both countries to stop

and join the international treaty to ban their use. As W. M. Hughes, Prime Minister of Australia during the war to end all wars, observed:

'The increasing intensity of competition for economic markets must lead to armed conflict unless an economic settlement is found. This, however, is hardly to be hoped for. Talk about peace in a world armed to the teeth is utterly futile' (*News Chronicle*, 25 July 1936).

And today:

'A senior U.S. State Department official said Thursday that a massive Ukraine aid package — which contains \$4 billion in grants for allies to buy American-made military hardware — is partly aimed at eroding Russia's share of the global defense market' (US poised to bite into Russia's global defense market share, yahoo.com, 13 May).

We should remember that

'The way things are organised is neither natural nor inevitable, but created by people. People have a wealth of skill, intelligence, creativity and wisdom. We could be devising ways of using and distributing the earth's vast resources so that no one starves or lives in abject poverty, making socially useful things that people need — a society which is life-affirming in all its aspects' (Alice Cook and Gwyn Kirk, *Greenham Women Everywhere*, South End Press, 1983).

What they say they want is also what socialists want; and when enough of us want it we will be able to combine those two remarkable human capacities, the emotional and the rational, in order to take things into our own hands and run our own society, our own world, in the interest of all people. Only then will 'peace and life' be possible.



UK BRANCHES & CONTACTS

LONDON

North London branch. Meets 3rd Thurs. 8pm on Discord. 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. Ring for details: 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.ksrb@worldsocialism.org.

South West regional branch. Meets 3rd Sat. 2pm on Zoom. For invite email: 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, Hetherset, NR9 3JD. 01603 814343.

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

Cambridge. Contact: Andrew Westley, wezelecta007@gmail.com. 07883078984.

IRELAND

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

SCOTLAND

Edinburgh branch. Meets 1st Thurs. 7-9pm on Discord. Contact: J. Moir. 0131 440 0995. jimmyjmoir73@gmail.com
 Branch website: <http://geocities.com/edinburghbranch/>

Glasgow branch. Meets 1st and 3rd Tues. on Discord. Contact: Peter Hendrie, 75 Lairhills Road, East Kilbride, Glasgow G75 0LH. 01355 903105.

peter.anna.hendrie@blueyonder.co.uk

Dundee. Contact: Ian Ratcliffe, 12 Finlow Terrace, Dundee, DD4 9NA. 01382 698297.

Ayrshire. Contact: Paul Edwards 01563 541138. rainbow3@btopenworld.com.

WALES

South Wales Branch (Cardiff and Swansea)

Meets 2nd Monday 7.30pm on JITSJ.
 Contact: botterillr@gmail.com or Geoffrey Williams, 19 Baptist Well Street, Waun Wen, Swansea SA1 6FB. 01792 643624

Central Branch

Meets 1st Sun, 11am (UK time) on Zoom. For invite email: cbs@worldsocialism.org.

INTERNATIONAL CONTACTS

AFRICA

Kenya. Contact: Patrick Ndege, PO Box 13627-00100, GPO, Nairobi
Zambia. Contact: Kephias Mulenga, PO Box 280168, Kitwe.

ASIA

Japan. Contact: Michael. japan.wsm@gmail.com

AUSTRALIA

Contact: Trevor Clarke, wspa.info@yahoo.com.au

EUROPE

Denmark. Contact: Graham Taylor, Kjaerslund 9, Floor 2 (middle), DK-8260 Viby J.
Norway. Contact: Robert Stafford. hallblithe@yahoo.com
Italy. Contact: Gian Maria Freddi, Via Poiano n. 137, 37142 Verona. gm.freddi@libero.it
Spain. Contact: Alberto Gordillo, Avenida del Parque. 2/2/3 Puerta A, 13200 Manzanares.

COMPANION PARTIES OVERSEAS

Socialist Party of Canada/Parti Socialiste du Canada. Box 31024, Victoria B.C. V8N 6J3 Canada. SPC@iname.com

World Socialist Party (India) 257 Baghajatin 'E' Block (East), Kolkata- 700086, 033- 2425-0208. wspindia@hotmail.com

World Socialist Party (New Zealand) P.O. Box 1929, Auckland, NI, New Zealand.

World Socialist Party of the United States. P.O. Box 440247, Boston, MA 02144 USA. boston@wspus.org

Publications to order

PAMPHLETS (£4.00 each unless stated otherwise)

- What's Wrong With Using Parliament?** £2.50
- Ecology and Socialism**
- From Capitalism to Socialism** £3.50
- Africa: A Marxian Analysis**
- Socialism as a Practical Alternative**
- Some Aspects of Marxian Economics** £5.50
- How the Gods Were Made by John Keracher**
- Marxism and Darwinism by Anton Pannekoek**
- Art, Labour and Socialism by William Morris**
- How We Live and How We Might Live by William Morris**
- The Right to be Lazy by Paul Lafargue**
- Socialist Principles Explained** £2.50
- The State and the Socialist Revolution by Julius Martov**
- An Inconvenient Question**
- Sylvia Pankhurst on Socialism** £3.00
- Why Socialists Oppose Zionism & Anti-Semitism** £3.50
- Rosa Luxemburg on Socialism**

The Magic Money Myth

BOOKS

- Strange Meeting: Socialism & World War One** £4.50
- Are We Prisoners of Our Genes?** £5.50
- Socialism or Your Money Back** £4.00
- Centenary of the Russian Revolution** £8.00
- All of the above books (25% discount)** £16.00

DVD

- Capitalism and Other Kid's Stuff** £5.75
- Poles Apart? Capitalism or socialism as the planet heats up** £5.75

All prices include postage and packing. For six or more of any publication, reduce the price by one third.

*Return this form along with your cheque or money order to: **The Socialist Party, Clapham High Street, London SW4 7UN***

NAME:.....

ADDRESS:

.....

.....

POSTCODE:.....

Signs of things to come

MUCH OF our planet is suffering from heatwaves and droughts with record-breaking temperatures and the experts say it is not isolated incidents but a harbinger of weather events that will become increasingly common in the future as global warming increases.

Namrata Chowdhary of the environment activist group, 350.org, stressed that 'the truth behind these heatwaves is searingly clear: fossil fuels did this. While these temperatures are quite literally shocking, they come as no real surprise to communities that have long since lived on the frontlines of the climate crisis.' Chowdhary continued, 'This is the latest spike in a rapidly worsening disaster, one that was foretold by climate activists the world over.'

Nushrat Rahman Chowdhury, co-author of a Christian Aid report, said: 'Drought is not new, but its intensity and frequency have increased over the last 30 years due to global warming. It is a real danger; it threatens lives and livelihoods of some of the poorest people in the world, who have done the least to cause the climate crisis'.

Over 1.2bn poor people across the globe are highly vulnerable to extreme heat, which is 28 million people more than in 2021, according to Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL).

The western states of the United States are suffering one of the worst droughts in a thousand years. California is in its third year of drought and virtually all areas of the state are classified as either in severe or extreme drought. However, US farmers will get insurance payouts, although this means rising premiums, and also are entitled to government tax subsidies.

European countries such as France and Spain are also being subject to punishing drought conditions. However, in Africa it leads to hunger and migration, since it is the poor who are the most vulnerable victims.

One Karachi-based urban planning advisor said the urban poor would suffer most from extreme heat, probably due to the 'urban heat island effect', where concrete-built landscapes push up temperatures: 'Unplanned densification, automobile intensive mobility choices and rapidly reducing green cover are worrying urban trends.'

The poor do not have access to indoor cooling and the infrastructure in the slums makes life even harder, plus they often do outdoor construction and agricultural work with no shelter during the worst of the day's heat. Heat is a

silent killer, often responsible for more deaths than higher-profile disasters like floods, hurricanes or tornadoes, and the rising toll is expected to worsen as the world warms. In 2010, a heat wave in India killed 1,344 people in the western Pakistan city of Ahmedabad alone. In 2015, a heat wave killed more than 1,000 in the capital, Islamabad. However, due to inadequate death registration procedures this is likely to represent an undercount for the whole region.

According to the *Lancet*, 356,000 people died of extreme heat in 2019 alone.

The World Weather Attribution group analysed historical weather data and suggested that early, long heatwaves that impact a massive geographical area are rare, once-a-century events. But anthropogenic climate change has made these 30 times more likely. That may be a conservative estimate as another study by the UK Met Office said climate change makes heatwaves in north-west India and Pakistan 100 times more likely. That means the region may now see such events in excess of record 2010 temperatures every three years. If it were not for climate change, these events would happen just once every 312 years.

In 2018 Cape Town, in South Africa, was the world's first big city to almost run completely out of water. That problem hasn't gone away. The charity Christian Aid warned that in addition to Cape Town, London, Sydney, Beijing, Cairo and Phoenix are all in danger of running out of water as the climate crisis takes hold, according to

its report, 'Scorched Earth: the impact of drought on 10 world cities.'

Two-thirds of Africa is desert and dry savannah with 45 percent of Africa's land area affected by desertification, more than half of which is at very high risk of further desertification. Africa has suffered from drought more frequently than any other continent with 134 droughts between 2000 and 2019, of which 70 occurred in East Africa, with 14 extreme cases in the past two years alone. A fourth season of failed rains is causing one of the worst droughts East Africa has seen in decades and the UN's World Food Programme says up to 20 million people are at risk of severe hunger. In Somalia, 40 percent are facing starvation as the food and water supply becomes desperate. Millions of children are malnourished, while the domestic animals that families depend on have died. While in southern Africa Angola is facing the worst recorded drought in 40 years, with southern provinces where 1.58 million people are suffering high levels of acute food insecurity having experienced the fifth consecutive year of drought conditions.

Droughts are being fuelled by climate change, and so only global action can make a difference. Our urgent need is building a world of coordinated mutual aid which is integral to our case for a cooperative commonwealth for the future- world socialism. As explained in last month's *Material World* (tinyurl.com/2p8wzdr5) socialism may be Africans' last hope to change their dire situation and conditions.

ALJO



Jubilee Junket

TO PARAPHRASE a recent radio comedic comment, had Napoleon really wanted to take over Britain, rather than an army all he needed was to offer an extra two days' bank holiday. Then he would have been welcomed with cheers and bunting.

This satirical response was a none-to-serious explanation for the popular enthusiasm for the present monarch's platinum jubilee. Indeed, it can be difficult to understand why people who are increasingly struggling against economic challenges should wish to celebrate the present wealthy incumbent of a feudal institution adapted to the political needs of capitalism.

At the recent state opening of Parliament, due to the absence of the queen, the throne was occupied by her crown, an object of monetary value enough to ease the fuel poverty of a huge number of her impoverished subjects. Yet many will have spent some of their sparse and dwindling financial resources on plastic bunting made in China.

As Brexit and the 2019 general election demonstrated, there remains a strong nationalist resonance, a significant bulwark protecting the status quo. There will have been very many who did not deck their homes in red, white and blue, or watch the seemingly endless sycophantic 'news' items and kitsch TV programmes, yet still were broadly sympathetic to the event.

The jubilee is an indication of the seemingly Sisyphean task facing socialists arguing that the working class needs to take responsibility for, and actively pursue, abolishing capitalism in favour of a new, true commonwealth. This will be a worldwide society of democratically achieved common ownership of production for need not profit.

It will certainly be a world without leaders, monarchs or otherwise. Those who count themselves republicans will have taken exception to the jubilation, demanding the hereditary monarchy be replaced by an elected president. While superficially this appears more democratic, effectively it changes little.

A cursory glance at countries with presidents is not encouraging. The USA is the self-proclaimed land of the free, but it's a freedom to live in dire poverty for all too many, with racial divisions and a small financial elite hell bent on preserving their freedom to remain obscenely wealthy.

The ineffective nature of the US presidency when it comes to helping resolve

social issues is shown by the continuing slaughter of school children to preserve the free market in assault rifles. The president may weep, but it's nowhere near the flood of tears shed by grieving parents.

President Putin is as readily seduced by martial ambitions as ever the Tsars were and presides over a country afflicted by poverty, be it of workers not peasants. In France nationalism remains a curse and is no more economically progressive, whatever that might mean, than Britain. The challenge to republicans is to identify one republic that is a significant improvement on British monarchy.

The problem is that a huge effort would be required throughout the UK to convince enough of the electorate to trigger a referendum and then vote for the abolition of the monarchy in favour of a republic. Having achieved that, then nothing would have significantly changed. Capitalism can comfortably continue with a presidential head of state as it does in most of the world. As Belloc suggested, most people will 'always keep a-hold of nurse for fear of finding something worse'.

Here lies the nub of the issue. It is not that monarchists are more deluded than republicans, rather it's the fact the working class has not yet grasped its potential to look or move beyond capitalism. To do so there needs to be an ideological shift to an understanding that leaders, actual or symbolic or both, cannot deliver such a transformation on behalf of the working class. New political forms will have to be developed, transcending present institutions.

This is what is meant by revolution, not barricades and street fighting, the storming of Winter, or any other, palaces. The revolution comes about by men and women democratically making their own future through a radical change in thinking that emerges from an understanding of the material reality of the present. Monarchs and presidents are both barriers that will have to be overcome through a popular understanding of their role in preserving present social, economic and political arrangements.

In any society, the seeds of the future are sown even if the social soil is not so fertile as yet. Many of the jubilee events, street parties, community picnics and the like, were people freely working together cooperatively without any incentive of financial reward, often the opposite, for a common goal. Such examples show that people can and will work without being



Credit: © Arthur Edwards/WPA Pool/Getty

wage slaves requiring the threat of the lash of poverty.

A street party works because people contribute what they can – sweet, savoury, alcoholic or non-alcoholic, bunting, music and so on. Then people take what they need, even those who didn't contribute due to their particular circumstances, too elderly for example.

While there are no moments of socialism while capitalism exists – all those elements for the street party will have been commodities produced for the realisation of profit – there is social motivation that gives a glimpse of what is possible.

This is not to suggest in any way that the motivation behind jubilee events was socialist-inspired. However, socialists must be aware that no matter how much they might deplore the overt motivation behind the events, the capitalist state's ideological reinforcement of its legitimacy, there is nonetheless an underlying if presently unconscious potential.

The jubilee weekend came and went. By Monday the bunting was already starting to look incongruous and, like street party memories, beginning to fade. Capitalism is already reckoning the balance sheet, lost production due to time off set against increased retail sales.

As the present monarch becomes increasingly frail the state will have plans in place for the succession. Should the royal family then prove to be as dysfunctional as its recent history suggests it might be, republicans may get their moment. Then, no doubt, there'll be an extra bank holiday to mark the inauguration of the new president. More plastic bunting from wherever capitalism has shifted production to by then.

Or, maybe, a different way of doing things altogether...

DAVE ALTON

What has the monarchy done for us?

HOW DOES a technologically and industrially advanced 21st century nation come to have an unelected head of state that is at the centre of extravagant and expensive medieval-inspired rituals such as coronations and jubilees? Many countries have adopted, in various forms, a constitutional monarchy but none go to such lengths to celebrate monarchical decadence as do the English. It is all the more surprising since it was the English bourgeoisie who were historically the first to cut off a king's head during their quest for power in the 17th century. Far from being a symbol of Englishness the present queen comes from an ancient line of German princes who, in many of their inbred incarnations, actively opposed English imperialism. We can answer some of these questions historically but how are we to explain the admiration of so many of the working class for this symbol of their slavery?

The Tudor dynasty had adopted (rather half-heartedly) the Reformation and developed a centralised state that made the evolution of the modern nation state possible in the following centuries. When the last of them (Elizabeth I) died the Scottish Stuart dynasty took over with an inbuilt autocratic tendency that was to prove ill-suited to deal with the rise of the 'middle class' and their rising hegemony within parliament (House of Commons). The resulting revolution convulsed the country with some quarter of a million casualties (making the French revolution look like a bar brawl) and a republic whose leaders executed the king (Charles I) for treason. This regime was soon to degenerate into a military dictatorship that was thoroughly disliked by the people and a deal was done with Charles II for his return on the understanding he would respect parliamentary power. This again soon degenerated into an attempt at counter revolution led by James II, which proved once and for all to the English bourgeoisie that they could not trust the Stuarts and that their only hope for a truly constitutional monarchy was to call on William of Orange who had proven his credentials in this respect within the Dutch Republic. This proved to be successful in giving the illusion of both historical/royal continuity and also liberating capitalist trade from the

threat of monopolistic autocracy.

Subsequent 'Whig' historians dedicated themselves to creating a history where the English revolution was relegated to a religious civil war followed quickly by a 'restoration' that hardly troubled the calm national continuity of the English class system. This myth became very convenient when the international power of the English ruling class was threatened by the French Revolution and the subsequent rise of the European Napoleonic Empire. The political convulsions of continental Europe were contrasted to the stability of the British system and it is indeed true that the first of the French revolutionaries wanted to create a constitutional monarchy on the English model but the duplicity of their king (just as with Charles I) made this impossible giving the militant Jacobins their chance to create a republic. Another difference between the two revolutions was the relatively quick integration of the bourgeois and aristocratic classes in England. The ruling class was now economically entirely capitalistic but the old families of aristocratic origin retained an air of cultural superiority and the nouveau rich could not help but admire this ancient elitism – when it didn't conflict with profit making. The other element of aristocratic culture that the English bourgeoisie absolutely adored was the warrior tradition and pageantry. No coal magnate, however rich, could compare with the mythology of Henry V and his victory at Agincourt!

To this day the glamour attached to the aristocracy and the royal family in particular, is used to sell the illusion that the English are a united country which all have a common interest to preserve.

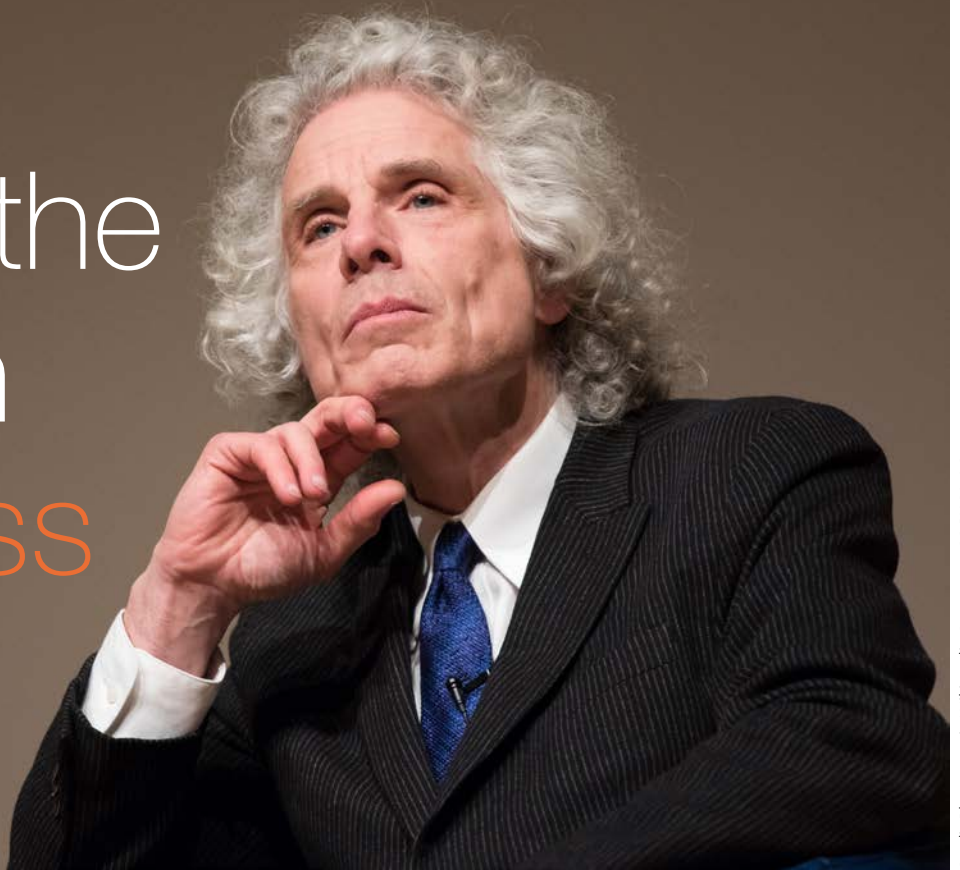
As with all hierarchical social structures there is a need to condition those without wealth and power to believe that those who possess it are somehow different and special. Along with the myth of the 'self-made man' capitalism needs a symbol of nationalism/militarism and what better symbol than those descended from murderers (warriors) to stand on balconies wearing pantomime military uniforms. For socialists the queen stands for: nationalist tribalism, class privilege, massive unearned wealth, Christian superstition and unelected power. They cannot even preserve the image of an ideal bourgeois family that serves as a model for us all given the continual scandals emanating from what must be one of the most dysfunctional families in existence. Such criticisms are commonplace and feel like an exercise in the proverbial 'shooting ducks in a barrel' but somehow these people continue to be admired by many within the working class.

Given the history above and the usefulness of the royal family as propaganda we can see how they are placed at the centre of UK capitalism's greatest shibboleth – 'patriotism'. No mainstream politician dares question this tribal loyalty in public just as they would not criticise its royal incarnation. Perhaps to the younger people the royals are merely celebrities but for those of an older generation they represent a perverse feeling of community and continuity despite the reality that it is their existence and the class they represent that continually destroys communities by fuelling the relentless class struggle.

WEZ



Steven Pinker, the modern Pangloss



Credit: Bhaawest via Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 4.0.

LIKE A FEARFUL angel, you don't need to tread far into the recent works of Steven Pinker, particularly *The Better Angels of our Nature* (2011) and *Enlightenment Now* (2018), to get the gist of his popular thesis that today is better than yesterday and tomorrow will be better still, so long as states maintain control and reason triumphs over savage instinct. *Better Angels* is Bill Gates's favourite book, and it's not hard to see why.

The appeal is in the sensationally anti-intuitive optimism and the simplicity of the argument. A clear line is drawn from barbaric prehistory through the murderous Middle Ages all the way to the relatively placid present, in a bid to demonstrate the 'civilising process' embodied by states, which has led to universally declining levels of violence. Pinker doesn't claim it's a new idea, and indeed bases much of his argument on Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process*, published in Germany in 1939 (a not-insignificant date, as we shall see).

It's also an idea with some good *prima facie* evidence supporting it, at least for Western Europe during the last few centuries, at least for average civilian homicide rates. Few historians would argue that murder rates in this part of the world have *not* declined substantially over that period.

But zoom out, and the price of this simple linear argument seems to be that all other lines and details have been

overlooked, rather like a large-scale geographical map from which all roads and features have been erased, apart from the one single highway that Pinker wants you to follow.

Predictably, this has enraged academic historians, who liken Pinker to a visitor who enters your house in muddy boots and then sticks his feet up on your living room table. Now, frustrated by the fact that 'Pinker's message is reaching the masses, and ours is not', many of these historians, some of them from Pinker's own Harvard University, have joined forces to deliver a devastating counter-blow (*The Darker Angels of our Nature: Refuting the Pinker Theory of History & Violence*, edited by Philip Dwyer and Mark Micale, Bloomsbury, 2022). There are 18 chapters written by experts in pre- and medieval history, early modern Russia and Japan, the Enlightenment, the British Empire, and histories of the environment, sexual violence, race, and the myth of a universal human nature. Some contributors offer a cool and detached evaluation of Pinker's methodology, while others write with barely concealed rage at his blithe effrontery and cavalier lack of scholarship.

Pinker's approach to evidence is variously described as shoddy, egregious and cherry-picking. He quotes sources that suit his argument, even if they're only coffee-table books (like *The Great Big Book of Horrible Things*), and ignores vast

swathes of respectable research that don't. For instance, the medievalist Sara Butler writes: 'Pinker has never seen a medieval court record, nor does he understand how the law worked in the Middle Ages... When he measures medieval against modern statistics, he has no idea that they are measuring very different things... without valid statistics, Pinker's entire argument falls apart' (p136).

**Pinker doesn't know,
he's guessing, and
relying on estimates
which are themselves
sometimes wildly inflated
and ideologically suspect**

If you ever wondered how Pinker could possibly know the murder rates in medieval times, with its patchy records, or in prehistory, with almost no records, you'll find academic historians asking exactly the same question. Pinker doesn't know, he's guessing, and relying on estimates which are themselves sometimes wildly inflated and ideologically suspect, like those of Catholic missionaries estimating the supposed violence of heathen Native Americans. If you as an archaeologist

dug up two Iron Age skeletons, and one had had its head bashed in, you wouldn't automatically conclude that the murder rate must have been 50 percent. Archaeologist Linda Fibiger certainly wouldn't. She studied 1,000 human remains from 150 sites spanning 3,000 years and made tentative conclusions on interpersonal violence only for that period and only within that geographical range. Pinker makes continent-wide conclusions based on 21 individuals from one Jutland cemetery (p.115).

What we discover, in chapter after chapter, is that Pinker is massaging the evidence, upwards in the case of the past, to make violence and 'savagery' look much worse than it really was, and downwards in the present, to make the world seem more peaceful than it really is. To take one example, he cites one claim that the Spanish Inquisition executed 350,000 Jews in 350 years, which was nearly twice the total population of Jews in Spain during that period (p.128). He also name-checks an eminent researcher but without mentioning the researcher's own estimate of executions for the same period at around 810, a figure widely considered more reliable. This figure generates its own irony, as it would mean that Pinker's own 'civilised' USA, with 1,526 executions between 1973 and today (p.270), has executed almost twice as many people as the Spanish Inquisition, and in a fifth of the time.

In reality, much of the historical evidence suggests the opposite of what Pinker claims. The Middle Ages was not addicted to cruel executions, which were in fact rare, and most punishments were in the form of fines. Early modern Russia, considered 'uncouth' by Western standards, executed far fewer people than its neighbouring European countries, and with less Grand Guignol cruelty. The Enlightenment, rather than civilising society, served to justify unparalleled colonial and racist violence, while

**Pinker is unashamedly
a neo-Hobbesean, arguing
that in 'non-state societies'
we humans are ruled by
our inner demons**

excluding whole categories including women from supposedly universal notions of human rights. There's a pattern to all this, and you can easily find other examples yourself. For instance, the 'Wild West' was arguably less violent than the modern USA and had more robust gun laws (bit.ly/3wYwj7S).

Pinker is unashamedly a neo-Hobbesean, arguing that in 'non-state societies' we humans are ruled by our inner demons- predation, dominance, revenge, sadism and ideology ('ideology' here meaning fascism, Marxism etc, but not his own perspective, which doesn't count), whereas the benevolence of disinterested elites (like himself) and the 'gentle commerce' of capitalism have 'gifted' us modern civil liberties and allowed the predominance of our 'better angels' including empathy, self-control, a moral sense and reason. At no point does he consider that these modern freedoms had to be fought bitterly for, and in fact sees any social dissent or struggle as counter-productive and 'de-civilising'.

And here is where Elias, a German Jew writing in 1939, becomes relevant again. His theory of states as a civilising influence presupposed that the state itself was benevolent. Elias ended up doubting his own assumption (p.101)

precisely because of what subsequently happened in Europe. Yet Pinker skates over all this, dismissing the Holocaust as a statistical outlier that doesn't affect his main argument. Awkward details don't trouble him, as he 'only travels on the sunny side of the street' (p.66), trading in 'comfort history' and 'Pinking' the evidence (p.305). Though *Better Angels*, at 800 pages, seems to follow the principle that 'if you say it enough, it becomes true' (p.176), Ben Kiernan's *Blood and Soil - Sparta to Darfur* (2007) concludes, in 700 pages, that genocidal violence is as bad today as it's ever been (p.332). With Pinker, one is irresistibly reminded of Voltaire's Dr Pangloss, for whom everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

Finally, modern historians are suspicious of linear historical narratives, because linearity always involves leaving stuff out. Nowadays they prefer more 'webby' approaches which reflect the diverse and often contradictory nature of the evidence. Marx the dialectician would have approved of this approach, so it's a shame that one or two contributors in this book see him as part of the problem, a linear teleological thinker plotting a deterministic path to the future. This is to take the same one-sided view of Marx that Pinker takes of history. In all probability, judging from the withering scorn that Marx levelled at the half-baked and self-serving bourgeois thinkers of his own day, he would have given Pinker a roasting that even the sharpest condemnations in this collection would struggle to match.

PJS



Marxism and Leninism in Myanmar

A sympathiser sets out the history of 'socialism' in Myanmar.

MYANMAR IS a 'Global South' country with long borders shared with India and China. Before its independence, it was ruled by the colonial British as a province of British India. It was also known as Burma.

The earliest record of Marxism in Myanmar is 1923, long after the death of Marx and Engels. The Second International had already been replaced by the Third International. Most of the writers who represented orthodox Marxism were no longer alive or active. It was a time when most of the most talented scholars of Marxism had lost their influence and Marxism was being dictated by Stalin under the name 'Marxism-Leninism'. Leon Trotsky also started the left opposition to the Bolshevik government in that year.

The very first localised literature of Marxism in Myanmar was *Das Kapital* in a misleading translation inspired by nationalism. Since then, 'Bolsheviks' and 'communism' were the kind of keywords that could be seen in some of the publicity released. In 1930, Dr Thein Maung brought back some left-wing books from London to Myanmar. Those were the first books the radical youths in Myanmar encountered about Western communism. They influenced Thakin Nu, who later became the Prime Minister of Burma, and Thakin Soe, who founded both the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and the Red Flag Communist Party; together they founded the 'Nagani book club' for distributing left-wing books and articles. Dagon Taya, later a renowned writer, was one of the chairmen of the Rangoon University Student Union and once wrote a slogan on a wall claiming 'Long Live Soviet Myanmar' while he was travelling in 1939.

In 1939, a new chapter was opened for 'Communism' ('Marxism-Leninism') in Myanmar. Aung San (the 'father of the nation'), Thakin Soe, a handful of Chittagong radicals and some other leftists together founded the Communist Party of Burma. The CPB managed to link with the Third International as soon as it was founded because of the link between the Chittagonian Bengali founders such as H. N. Goshal and the Indian Communist Party. At that time in 1939, the Third International had already become a tool of Russian foreign policy, under the leadership of Stalin, and had successfully sabotaged strikes under the Popular Front government

in France and the social struggles of the CNT-FAI in Spain. The CPB was thus also bound to adopt disastrous tactics, including a series of mistakes that even orthodox Bolshevik leaders like Lenin and Trotsky had described as 'ultra-left', ie, the CPB chose not to take part in elections, but instead to wage war against the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League which was the acting government at that time. Later, the CPB didn't stop with Stalinism; it went further to Maoism which had rejected the class struggle and advocated the alliance of four nationalist classes. It ended up killing its own founders like H. N. Goshal in 1967 during the cultural revolution era.

One Party Rule

On 2 March 1962, a coup d'état took place which heralded the commencement of one-party rule in Myanmar and the army's political supremacy. The military who attempted the coup called themselves the Union Revolutionary Council (URC) and introduced a programme called 'The Burmese Way to Socialism'. The CPB denied the 'socialist' credentials of URC, however, the URC shared a lot of similar characteristics with Stalin's Russia, Mao's China, and Tito's Yugoslavia. The first of these was one-party rule with strong state power and hostility towards opposition. As Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas mentioned in his *The New Class*, 'modern Communism is a modern despotism which cannot help but aspire towards totalitarianism'. In terms of Marxism, such one-party totalitarianism has nothing to do with the dictatorship of the proletariat. As Rosa Luxemburg wrote once, 'Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only of the members of one party, however numerous they may be, is no freedom at all'. Equating one-party totalitarianism with the dictatorship of the proletariat shows a lack of understanding of Marxism. Marx and Engels identified the act of 'raising the proletariat to a ruling class' as 'the conquest of democracy'.

The second characteristic was the act of strengthening the state, which confirms the claim of Milovan Djilas which states: 'there is no doubt that a national communist bureaucracy aspires to more complete authority for itself'. Thirdly, Ne Win, chairman of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was anti-union just like Stalin,

Mao Zedong, and Tito. The BSPP faced much opposition from every side including student unions, workers' unions, political armed groups, and the government-in-exile.

Student Uprising

The best example of this was the '7th July Student Uprising' which was a series of marches, rallies, and protests against stricter campus regulations and the policies of General Ne Win's BSPP regime. The BSPP responded to the uprising by violently attacking the students, shooting them with machine guns and using explosives to blow up the whole student union building in University of Yangon, resulting in the deaths of more than a hundred, and the arrest of more than 6,000 students. The BSPP accused the students of being counter-revolutionary and reactionary because they were protesting against the 'socialist' state in the BSPP's view. After that incident, the BSPP attacked the very existence of the unions.

Furthermore, the BSPP implemented a programme like the 'war-communism' of Lenin's time. The BSPP-led Socialist Economy Construction Committee introduced an economic policy aimed at nationalising all businesses across the board, similar to what Milovan Djilas had described the self-styled Communists (Marxist-Leninists) as doing. According to Djilas, the communists wanted to ban strikes because in their view the working class was already in power and owned the means of production via the state. So if there was a strike of workers or students, it meant workers were striking against themselves. Through this tyrannical self-delusion the BSPP, along with all the communist regimes who claimed to follow Marxism-Leninism, responded violently to workers' strikes. A few international examples would include the Kronstadt rebellion against the Bolshevik government and the Georgian Mensheviks' soviet rebellion against the Bolshevik government. The CPB argued that the BSPP didn't represent the legacy of Marxism-Leninism, yet ironically the CPB claimed to follow Maoism while Mao Zedong himself was on excellent terms with Ne Win and his regime. The role of the CPB was ended by a series of battles with the military as well as internal coups resulting from their own inefficient revolutionary strategies and tactics.



Credit: © MgHla (aka) Htin Linn Aye

Ultra-nationalism

After 1988, a lot of regimes had come and gone, and Myanmar was on the way back to globalisation from ‘socialism’. From 1988 to 2010, Myanmar was governed by purely repressive regimes with no ideological background. However, after the 2007 Saffron revolution, the military regime had to acknowledge the revolutionary potential of the Buddhist monks, students, workers, and the public. So they tried to create an ideological fantasy based on ultra-nationalism, Buddhist supremacy and crony capitalism. From 2010 to 2021 most of the public were under the illusion of living in a democratic nation while minority ethnic groups were being bombed and killed. The oligarchs managed to accumulate capital which was more than enough for three to five successive generations while working-class people struggled to make ends meet. That was when the public enjoyed the illusion of liberal democracy and was the least revolutionary period, until some students chose to protest with an agenda for educational reforms in 2014. During that decade, the military had successfully radicalised the majority of the Buddhist monks with their self-serving ultra-nationalism and Buddhist supremacy. As Myanmar has a unique culture of monks being important (too important) when it comes to social values, a fraction of the working class also chose to give support to the successors of the military regime, bolstered by irrational fear of minority groups and other religions. Such a political agenda recalls Daniel De Leon’s remark that ‘the capitalist class is interested in keeping the working men divided among themselves’.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) was founded by ex-communists, ex-military officers and left-leaning social democrats

in 1988. Aung San Suu Kyi, the ‘democracy idol’ of Myanmar, forged a de facto alliance with the military to attain governmental status. Since then, not only did the NLD not achieve its goal of kicking the military out of politics but they also failed to protect minority ethnic groups like the Rohingya from genocide. Under the leadership of ‘the lady’ Suu Kyi, the NLD changed its political ideology from social democracy to liberalism. This was not apparent at first, but as soon as they were elected as an acting government, they failed to implement all the social democratic policies. The NLD lost their social democratic connections with the interests of the working class and with the national self-determinism of ethnic groups. Such reactionary behaviour resulted in some far-left and centre-left youths losing their trust in the NLD, and searching for a third alternative either in some social democratic reformist party or a revolutionary socialist party.

Another military coup

In February 2021, the military decided to stage another coup to restore their former golden days and to protect family members who had become oligarchs and cronies. The public at first was hesitant to react with strikes and protests. But the coup sparked enormous protests and dissent which were brutally suppressed by the military, with about 1,500 people dead, either shot in the streets, tortured and murdered in detention, or just disappeared. Even though the military managed to seize power and arrest some influential political leaders like Suu Kyi and Mya Aye, some of the NLD members escaped and formed a National Unity Government (NUG) in exile, in alliance with some ethnic leaders and other small political groups taking the role of consultative council. Even today, the NUG fails to grasp the opportunity to radicalise the public, even

for reformist social democratic values. The NUG still acts like a parallel government. Yet third-party alternatives such as the Maoist CPB, Trotskyist organisations and social democratic reformists also failed to radicalise the public for a socialist revolution.

Theo Maung, who describes himself as a libertarian socialist and one of the founders of the Burmese Atheists Association, said that he was expecting a more progressive and secular society from the revolt against the coup. He was confident that people were turning away from authoritarianism and racial and religious discrimination as a result of their struggles against the junta. He pointed out that the CPB managed to recover again after the coup but that the new generation of leftists like him didn’t accept the authoritarian communists. He also said that if there was to be another communist party in Myanmar, he expected a more libertarian-leaning one with little influence from Marxism-Leninism and Maoism. Yoe Thit Aung, an anarchist, also had a view on the revolution: ‘I personally don’t see the revolution as a class struggle but rather a transformation of crony capitalism into corporate capitalism. Traditionally the NLD is a populist and conservative party. NUG is trying their best for more progressive reforms, but they will never go for radical ends’. He thinks that the old bourgeois crony class will be useful as a national bourgeois class in the post-revolutionary period.

To sum up, Myanmar has a lot of experience of Marxism-Leninism (so-called communism) and military dictatorships. It’s unfortunate that Myanmar was never influenced by the internationalist and revolutionary socialism (Marxist) tradition of Georgi Plekhanov, Julius Martov, Rosa Luxemburg and others, which represents the Marxism of Marx and Engels in seeking the democratic emancipation of the working class.

HEIN HTET KYAW

‘Ethical Shopping’: A Luxury

COUNT YOUR food miles, buy organic, live without plastics, buy local products, support small businesses – we’re told this is how individual consumers can choose to help the environment.

Really? Don’t get us wrong. We’re all in favour of people taking personal responsibility – the voluntary society we want will depend on that very thing.

But these incitements to personal sacrifice are a gigantic act of misdirection. The powers-that-be love talking about your personal responsibility for the state of the planet, because it’s better than owning up to their collective responsibility for ruining it.

They are responsible for a wasteful system that creates obscene wealth and luxury for the 1 percent while many of us end up struggling just to get by. And they have the cheek to tell us to cut back on our personal consumption!

So be responsible, by all means. But just remember, capitalism never will be.

Now ask yourself these questions:

1. Why is it that most of what we ever buy – food, clothes, electricals, etc., is mass produced?

It’s because of economies of scale, which reduce production costs, so mass-produced stuff comes to dominate the



market because it’s always cheaper.

2. Does this stuff have to come from so far away?

The companies that make the stuff are always trying to undercut each other to grab more market share. This has tended to push production out to wherever in the world wages are cheapest, resulting in long, complex supply chains and wasteful global transportation. These two factors have wiped out most local production over the decades, so we have little choice when we shop.

But there’s another factor that restricts our ability to choose. Our wage levels generally are determined by how much we have to spend to keep us in a condition that allows us to keep working. And it’s the prices of the global, mass-produced stuff (battery eggs, not free-range; prosecco, not champagne) that enter into that calculation.

So while some may be able to shop ‘ethically’, it’s a luxury many of us simply can’t afford.

Capitalism - a vampire horror story!

IN THE capitalist money system, the rich 1 percent are like demented vampires, sucking the life out of the planet until there’s nothing left. The solution isn’t garlic and crosses, it’s social revolution.

In world socialism, there is no money system. There are no rich people. There are no poor people. There are no bosses. There is no war. All decisions are shared. All responsibilities and resources are communal.

This is Earth under new management. Everyone’s.

You could learn to drive a bus or a train, fix plumbing, develop an AI application, plough a field, teach a child, chair a steering group, study marine ecosystems, cure a disease, brew beer, rehearse a play. Your time is your own, to use as you think best. Help society thrive, and discover a job satisfaction that money can’t buy.

Technology has made this society actionable right now, but the vampires are not going to give up their feeding habits. So the 99 percent need to act. Together we need to use the democratic machinery to take control away from the 1 percent and their political glove puppets, and abolish their self-serving property laws. Then we

can start restoring this planet to health and sanity.

It won’t be Utopia. No society is perfect. But collective and democratic cooperation will always find better solutions than crazed vampires ever can.



Freedom

“Do you see freedom as having to get into a car every day and drive into traffic, into smog, to go into some contrived glass office building that doesn’t produce anything, and push paper around for 40, 50 hours a week? Is that freedom?”

Is it the freedom to be able to walk into a store, if you have money, and buy the food that you need to survive, or is more freedom attached to the idea of not having to purchase anything, and having the necessities of life provided through structure. So instead of having to earn a living in high stress your entire existence, you can actually live your life.”
(Peter Joseph)

Q&A: The cost of living crisis

What is the cost of living?

The amount of money needed to cover expenses such as food, clothing, housing, heating, travel and entertainment to live at the standard that the average household can afford. As the income of the average household comes mainly from selling their ability to work to an employer, the cost of living is in effect the cost of maintaining and recreating the working skills of an average wage-earner household; the cost of living as a worker.

How is the cost of living measured?

By the total price of a basket of goods and services that households typically buy. In Britain this is calculated each month. The contents of the basket are slightly changed each year to reflect changes in buying habits. The result is not expressed as a figure in pounds and pence but as an index, against a given year, the base year, fixed as 100. In Britain the base year for this 'Consumer Prices Index' is 2015. In April 2022 it was 119; which means it has increased by 19 percent or at about 2.5 percent a year since 2015.

Is an increase in the Consumer Prices Index a measure of inflation?

That's the official view but it's actually only a measure of the average rise in consumer prices. To equate this with 'inflation' is misleading as it obscures the original meaning of the term and the fact that there are other reasons why the index can go up. Inflation, as the word itself suggests, is increasing ('inflating') the money supply beyond what the economy requires for its transactions. If this happens there is a general rise in prices, all prices rising as a result of the depreciation of the money tokens issued by the government or its central bank. If the economy requires, say, 1 million units of money and the government issues 1.1 million units, then the price level, as measured by the index, would go up by 10 percent. But this is not the only reason why the Consumer Prices Index can go up.

What is another reason?

The price of one of the goods or services in the basket going up because of a supply side problem. If paying demand exceeds supply this will push up the price of the good concerned. This would lead to an increase in the Consumer Prices Index (or CPIH if housing costs are included) but wouldn't be inflation in the original meaning of the term. In the 12 months to April 2022 the index went up

by 7.8 percent, which is a considerable acceleration of the average over the preceding 7 years. In their press release explaining this increase, the Office for National Statistics noted:

'The largest upward contributions to the annual CPIH inflation rate in April 2022 came from housing and household services (2.76 percentage points, principally from electricity, gas and other fuels, and owner occupiers' housing costs) and transport (1.47 percentage points, principally from motor fuels and second-hand cars)' (bit.ly/3GWXRz7).

The index went up, in other words, mainly as a result of the continuing rise in the energy element in the basket, though the prices of some other goods and services went up too due to continuing supply chain problems caused by the pandemic restrictions. The index didn't go up by that amount due to the Bank of England inflating the money supply.

Can the index go down?

Yes, it sometimes does slightly fall in the summer months reflecting the lower prices then of fresh fruit and vegetables. In fact, because of increasing productivity in the production of material goods, you would expect that the index would tend to fall over the course of time rather than rise as it has done. That it doesn't is due to deliberate government policy. If prices were continually falling this would tend to encourage people to put off buying some item in the hope that its price will fall. To encourage firms to produce and people not to wait to buy, the government has mandated the Bank of England to keep the rise in the Consumer Prices Index to 2 percent a year.

How does the Bank do this?

By inflating the money supply. This means it can be said that, in theory, at least 2 percentage points in the yearly rise in the index are due to inflation in the original sense of the term and that at the moment anything substantially above this is likely to be attributable to other factors such as supply problems for particular goods or services. When, earlier this year, the index began to move towards an increase of 5 percent a year the Bank was not that worried, arguing that it would only be temporary and that within a year or so the index would fall back to what it had been. Now, with the war in Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia, they are not so optimistic and are predicting that the index will go even higher, even to double digits, and that this will last longer.

A real cost of living crisis, then?

Yes, consumer prices, especially of energy, have risen to a level at which the average household cannot afford to live at their previous standard of comfort. A fall in people's standard of living is worse for the already worst off.

What can we do about it?

Don't expect the government to do much. Unfortunately, there is not much that those dependent on state benefits can do except take whatever extra the state has decided to hand out. Those dependent on an income from working for an employer can – and should – struggle, through their trade union, to get a higher price for what they sell. Given current labour market conditions they should be able to get this, even if it will just be stopping things from getting worse. The media will blame them for causing 'inflation' but even the government's own statisticians admit that the Consumer Prices Index has shot up for supply reasons and not because of 'greedy workers'. In any event, wages have always been linked to the cost of living, as this means the cost of living of a wage-worker. So if this goes up it's normal that wages should too; otherwise we won't be getting the full price of what we are selling. But the struggle to keep wages up with the cost of living, necessary as it is, is a never-ending struggle which will last as long as the wages system does.

Why is there a cost of living anyway?

Good question. Why should we have to pay to live? It's only because the means of life are monopolised by a tiny minority who live off profits and which obliges us to work for wages, out of which we have to buy what we need to live. If the means of life – the productive resources of society – were owned in common by society as a whole, then we could produce what we needed and people would have free access to what they need to live and enjoy life. There would be no cost of living and no perpetual struggle to try to keep up with it.



No Such Thing as Free Shorter Hours

The *Times* (6 June) reported that ‘more than 3,000 workers will begin a four-day week today with no loss of pay as part of a trial involving 70 companies’. The companies concerned ‘are testing the effect of offering 100 per cent of a job’s pay in exchange for 80 per cent of the time and a commitment to keep up 100 per cent of output.’

The six-month trial has been organised by the UK branch of 4 Day Week Global which promotes a four-day week as a business strategy calculated to increase productivity and the ‘wellbeing’ of the workers which will also increase productivity:

‘Adopting a four-day work week is a business improvement strategy centered on working smarter rather than longer, and investing in the wellbeing of the most important asset to any business – your people (...) The four-day work week has been proven to deliver increased productivity in businesses all over the world in a broad range of industries’ (www.4dayweek.com/why-pilot).

Many, perhaps most, people would like to work only four days a week and

have a three-day weekend. However, they might not necessarily like the conditions in the experiment to ‘keep up 100 per cent of output’.

What this involves is easy to work out. If you are on £26,000 a year take-home pay, your weekly pay will be £500. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the rate of exploitation is 100 percent, then you produce output worth £1,000 in a week (your pay plus an equivalent amount of surplus value – that’s why you are a business’s ‘most important asset’). When you work a 5-day 7-hour week (35 hours) you produce £28.58 worth of output in a day. With a 4-day 7-hour week (28 hours) this goes up to £37.72. An increase of 25 percent.

Having to work 25 percent harder means that you will use up the energy represented by your labour-power quicker and so will need more rest to restore it, ready to commence the next week’s harder labour. You are going to need that extra day.

One of those taking part in the experiment, Kirsty Wainwright, the general manager of a fish and chip shop in Norfolk,

was reported as saying: ‘Having that extra rest and not feeling exhausted means I can be more productive at work too.’

She has got it the wrong way around. It is having to be more productive at work that means she will require the extra rest, and she is being overoptimistic if she expects that she is not going to be more exhausted at the end of each of the days that she works than she is now. She will be because she will have had to use up more of her energy per day than previously.

Maybe she and the others will consider that working harder to get more time away from employed work is a price worth paying. Historically, workers have accepted this deal, as when the working week was reduced from 6 to 5½ and then to the 5 days it mostly is now. So maybe they will too if the 4-day week catches on.

Under capitalism the ideal for workers would be to work fewer days without having to work harder during them. But no employer will accept that as it would reduce their profit. Under capitalism working harder will always be the price for working fewer hours. Employers are not philanthropists.

SOCIALIST PARTY OFFICIAL LOGO T-SHIRTS • £12 Including UK P&P*

Printed on 100% cotton and available in black, purple or red with the official Party logo and short web address in white. Available in M/L/XL/XXL (while stocks last). £10 if collected from Head Office.



To order: Send £12 per shirt payable to The Socialist Party of Great Britain, 52 Clapham High Street, London SW4 7UN (or Paypal as email address below) stating colour and size required with your name, address and phone number. *Overseas orders (and enquires): Please email for a price first with ‘T-Shirt Order’ in the subject line to spgb@worldsocialism.org

Mailing bags recycle with supermarket carrier bags

A Bite From The Apple

WHO BETTER to warn us about the dangers of technology and corporate culture than Apple Inc? The recent American drama serial *Severance*, released through Apple TV+, was an offbeat and engaging thriller set in an office with a unique approach to managing its human resources. Echoing *Black Mirror's* template, the series imagines a piece of technology which sounds like it could be invented and embedded within a few years and explains how it'll lead to a scary alienated dystopia.

The premise is that staff working for the mysterious Lumon Industries have voluntarily undergone a procedure called 'severance'. This involves a microchip being inserted into their brain, making them an 'appendage of the machine' in a more literal way than Marx meant. The chip separates their persona at work from their persona outside, meaning that when they're in the office they can't remember anything of their home life and vice versa. Communication between the workplace persona – the 'Innie' – and their 'Outie' self at home, such as through smuggled notes, is prevented by 'code detectors' when they enter and leave the office.

The severance procedure is supposed to put a definite dividing line in Lumon's staff's 'work-life balance', a phrase which meant 'how much employment encroaches on our lives' until the pandemic disrupted everything and a 'work-life balance' became a luxury for many. You can tell *Severance* had been drafted out before Covid hit; working from home isn't an option for the characters in the drama, and wouldn't fit in with the premise. Perhaps as a result, the story isn't set in any particular time; the severance technology is futuristic, while the cars and computers are styled to look like they're from the last century.

The severance procedure is an exaggeration of how in real life we often find that the 'version' of ourselves at work is a bit different from that outside. When we start our shift, our personalities shift to slot in with the culture where we work, with its written and unwritten rules and norms. Many workplaces, especially sleek offices like Lumon's HQ, feel impersonal and artificial, and difficult to be at ease in. The drama highlights this with the forced fun of the parties thrown for Lumon's Macrodata Refinement division as a reward



Credit: Apple TV

for reaching their targets. The story centres on the four members of this team, and the sinister management who ensure that they stay focused on their work. Most of the characters' conversations, whether in work or outside, are stilted and uncertain, and the only character with any joy is the non-Lumon employee and author of a tacky self-help book which sounds inspirational compared with the oppression of office life.

The work carried out by the Macrodata Refinement team makes little sense, involving sitting at their desks grouping together numbers on their screens according to how 'scary' they are. In real workplaces, we're often put in positions where we have to accept routines we don't understand and which seem to be there just to prop up a system. Moreover, being a tiny cog in a big machine usually means not having much ability to affect the procedures we follow. In Lumon Industries, the purpose given to the apparently purposeless work is to follow the vision of its founder, a more old-fashioned figure than the real world's tech luminaries with a messiah complex.

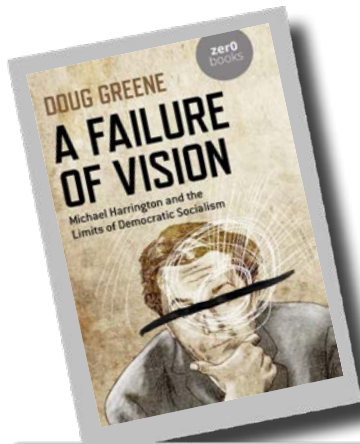
Naturally, the Macrodata Refinement team members each start to question their employment. Political resistance to the severance procedure is mentioned, but the drama's emphasis is on how it makes them feel uneasy, especially alongside Lumon's suspicious ways of operating. Annoyingly, the series ends just as an important plot point has been reached and without answering questions about Lumon's motives, so we'll have to wait for season two to see how the scenario pans out.

While *Black Mirror* is the most obvious influence on *Severance*, it is also part of a long-running trend in science fiction

exploring fears of having our personalities moulded by a power-hungry elite. In the 1972 book and 1975 film *The Stepford Wives*, the women of the well-to-do town of Stepford are replaced by obedient replicas to serve their husbands, a clever critique of conservative attitudes to women's roles. This came in the wake of the classic 1954 book / 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, about aliens who are surreptitiously substituting bland duplicates for people, interpreted as a metaphor for concerns about 'communism' infiltrating America. Its 1978 remake effectively reinterpreted the threat of being turned into an automaton as an extension of how society alienates us. In these stories, surrendering your personality is involuntary, whereas in *Severance*, it's chosen as a career move, albeit without realising all the nasty implications. In this way, the series is reminiscent of the 1988 movie *They Live*, where the ruling class (aliens, again) hide the truth and manipulate apparently content people to conform to the status quo, using subliminal messages in the media rather than implanted microchips. Another antecedent is the impressive 1967 TV serial *The Prisoner*, also set in a stylised, isolated place with its own strange rules and rituals to protect a secretive system. A message behind all these stories, including *Severance*, is that conforming to what's in the interests of those in power is dehumanising, even if this doesn't come with microchips.

MIKE FOSTER

Reformist



A Failure of Vision: Michael Harrington and the Limits of Democratic Socialism. By Doug Greene, Zero Books, 2021. £15.99

This is a political biography of Michael Harrington (1928-1989) who was the best known ‘socialist’ in the US after the death in 1968 of Norman Thomas, the perennial presidential candidate of the Socialist Party of America. Harrington was first associated with the Catholic Worker Movement but then became a ‘Shachtmanite’, an offshoot from Trotskyism based on the ideas of Max Shachtman whose difference with Trotsky was over ‘The Nature of the USSR’. Trotsky maintained that it was basically a ‘workers’ state’. Shachtman could see that this was an untenable position and argued that Russia was best described as ‘bureaucratic collectivism’, a new class society ruled by a new ruling class exploiting the workers. To begin with, he had held that Russia was more progressive than capitalism, but later that it was the other way round and he became a staunch ‘anti-communist’.

Taking this position, in 1958 Shachtman, Harrington and the others joined the Socialist Party of America. This was the nearest equivalent in the US of the Labour Party in Britain and held the same ideas as, at the time, that party did (except that it paid more lip-service to Marx’s ideas, in fact to ideas in general) – that the state capitalism that it called ‘socialism’ would come about gradually as the outcome of a series of nationalisations and social reforms introduced democratically; basically, reformists who wanted to humanise capitalism.

Not getting anywhere as a separate party, in 1973 Harrington and the others (Shachtman had died in 1972) decided to enter the Democratic Party and work to get it to adopt and enact progressive policies. Their political descendants today are the ‘Democratic Socialists of America’ which has recruited tens of thousands of

members and succeeded in getting some of its members elected (as Democrats) to the House of Representatives, the most well-known of whom is Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez.

Greene argues that, despite this posthumous relative success, Harrington’s entry into the Democratic Party with a view to ‘realigning’ it was a mistaken strategy; as the Democrats were a capitalist party beholden to capitalist interests, it led to Harrington and his group becoming its tail-end, working to ensure the election of Democratic Presidents and other officials to run the political side of American capitalism. On this point Greene is right. He also argues, again correctly, that capitalism cannot be gradually reformed so as to work in the interest of the working class.

However, he writes as a member of one of the 57 varieties of Trotskyism (a group called ‘Left Voice’). To be fair, he has confined his alternative strategy to get to state capitalism to an appendix in which he criticises Harrington’s ‘Democratic Marxism.’ This was a wise move on his (or his editor’s) part as his ‘vision’ of an insurrection and his defence of the idea that even under Stalin Russia was some sort of ‘workers’ state’ would have led to his criticism of Harrington’s gradualist reformism being taken less seriously.

ALB

Careerist and reformist



The Starmer Project. By Oliver Eagleton. Verso. 2022. £12.99

Just as we’ve become used over the years to all those tedious historiographies of the Bolshevik Revolution and Soviet Union that claimed it would have been alright if wasn’t for a particular bunch of malcontents and traitors who somehow ruined it all, so today we have the Corbynistas. And in particular, here we have Oliver Eagleton (son of Terry) to

tell us that Sir Keir Starmer is the new political antichrist and that he is never to be forgiven for undermining The Messiah, aka Saint Jeremy Corbyn. Furthermore, in this craven mission the swine apparently enlisted John McDonnell and a whole list of other Judas-like characters.

There is some useful research and journalism in this book (Eagleton writes for The Guardian periodically). But it is all filtered through such a thick distorting prism that you are left almost feeling sorry for Starmer, political careerist and reformist though he is.

There are four chapters that logically flow one after the other to mirror Starmer’s career: The Lawyer, The Politician, The Candidate and The Leader. Because it suits his purposes, Eagleton rather downplays Starmer’s early time in the 1980s in and around a Pabloite Trotskyist sect, though his time as Director of Public Prosecutions sees him seemingly held personally responsible for almost literally every legal decision at the time that Eagleton dislikes. You strongly suspect the truth lies somewhere in between that narrative and the one of the pious, upright human-rights lawyer that Starmer still likes to project.

But either way, this misses the point – as does much of the book. Eagleton lists the key features of what he calls ‘The Starmer Project’ thus:

‘1) a ‘values-led non-antagonistic election strategy; 2) an unsparing crackdown on the Labour Left, seen as more dangerous than the Conservatives; 3) an Atlanticist authoritarian disposition, combining intervention abroad with repression at home; and 4) a return to neoliberal economic precepts, overseen by Blairite leftovers’ (p.186).

But using this same categorisation, what was the leftist Corbyn project this replaced and was – in part – a reaction against? Arguably:

1) a ‘values-led’ but utopian and incoherent election strategy, doomed to predictable defeat and recrimination; 2) an unsparing crackdown on those elements in the Labour Party who knew how to win elections (ie, by telling the working class what it wants to hear); 3) a quasi-Leninist disposition, combining active or tacit support for repression abroad with intervention at home; and 4) a return to state capitalist economic precepts, overseen by Trotskyist and Stalinist leftovers.

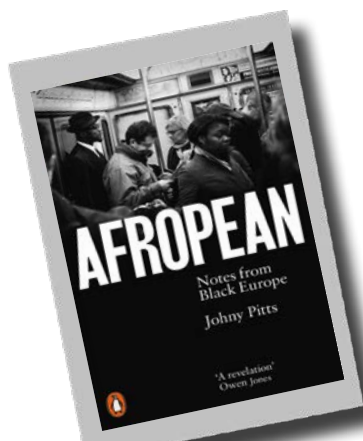
Eagleton – like Corbyn and many on the Labour Left – has a yearning against injustice that is commendable. However, he misunderstands the party he supports. The Labour Party exists to win elections (without power it is nothing) and to then enact mild reforms that can ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalist society – or

at least try to. Starmer stands foursquare in this tradition; the Corbyn mirage was that you could somehow more radically transform capitalism with its profit motive and market economy through leftist sloganeering combined with a Biblical proportions wish-list of largely unrealistic promises. This is not something that has ever worked – anywhere, in any country.

Some of what Eagleton says about Starmer hits home, but it is so skewed and partial at times it is not entirely reliable. Indeed, the abiding impression is that the book rather deceives by selection, and is significantly the worse for it.

DAP

Not Just Festivals



Afropean: Notes from Black Europe. By Johny Pitts. Penguin £10.99.

Pitts was born in Sheffield, to a white mother and black father, but he is not keen on the term 'mixed race', on the grounds that everyone is a mixture and there are no 'pure' races. Here he reports on a tour around some of Europe's cities, Stockholm to Marseilles, Moscow to Lisbon, in search of 'the banal humanity of everyday life', rather than just street festivals and carnivals. Among other topics, he also discusses the history of Portuguese colonialism and the life and ideas of Frantz Fanon (for more information and background, see afropean.com and johnypitts.com).

In France many poor people, especially immigrants, have been shunted out to the suburbs, away from city centres. Pitts visited Clichy-sous-Bois, an area of Paris not served by trains or the Métro, and which is far worse than any deprived estate in Britain. For instance, the unemployment rate there is almost one-third, much higher than the national average. Some people live in dilapidated tower blocks where many of the windows have no glass in them. Second-generation black immigrants are angry as they are treated as foreigners, despite being

taught to believe they are French.

The largest ethnic community in the Netherlands is Surinamese, the descendants of people brought by Dutch slave ships from West Africa to the north coast of South America. Many live on the Bijlmer estate near Amsterdam, where they squatted because few others wanted to live there. When black people complain about Dutch racism, some of the rest of society feel victimised, since the Netherlands is of course not a racist country.

Berliners pride themselves on living in a 'super-open society'. But carnivals seemed to be more about young people having fun, while genuine resistance by black people had a more dangerous hue to it. The city does have an Afropean area, with lots of different kinds of restaurants and music.

There are many African and Asian students in Russia, carrying on a tradition from the USSR. But in Moscow they may be spat at or attacked, are reluctant to be seen out with white friends, and prefer to stay in at night. (As a girlfriend later reminds Pitts, solo female travellers generally also have to be careful where they go and to look out for unwanted attention.)

The worst behaviour that he encountered was from British men, such as stag-dos in Amsterdam and drunken football supporters on a train in the south of France (he was addressed as 'Mr Afro-man'). His book provides a personal and depressing picture of the lives of so many black workers in Europe.

PB

Album review Tainted Lives

Happiness Not Included by Soft Cell
(BMG, 2022)



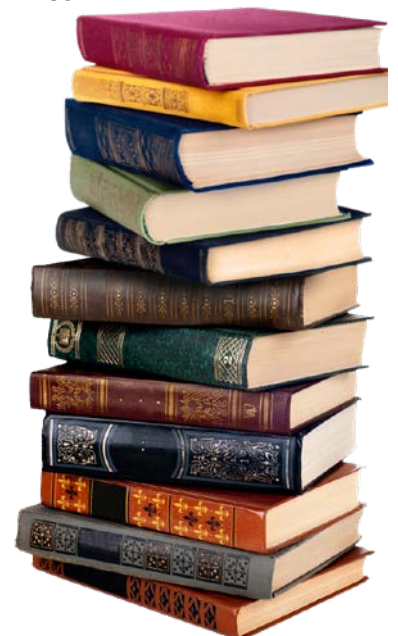
Soft Cell began their career when punk's angry energy was being channelled into then-new musical styles, such as the synth-based sound which has accompanied their songs of suburban angst. Since the band's peak of popularity in the early '80s, Marc Almond and Dave Ball have reunited for an album every couple of decades, now with *Happiness Not Included*. As its title suggests,

their slant on society and its mood is even more jaded than before, although not without optimism.

The appeal of looking backwards is the subject of songs *Polaroid*, *Nostalgia Machine* and opener *Happy Happy Happy* about sci-fi's off-kilter past dreams of the future ('a better life with little strife, and very little meaning'). The album's title track is a call to snap out of other stagnant ways of thinking ('Every opinion is seen as offensive. That's why we're always on the defensive', 'Times have moved and shifting sands. The future's in another lunatic's hands'), and is more directly political than the other songs.

The theme of living in an alienating world is found throughout Soft Cell's work, especially *Happiness Not Included*. Being hardened or numbed by life runs through tracks such as *Heart Like Chernobyl*, *I'm Not A Friend Of God* and, most effectively, *Tranquilliser*, one of the band's kitchen sink dramas. This treads similar ground to 1981's *Bedsitter*, although the escape from a lonely, hollow existence isn't in a nightlife to 'kid myself I'm having fun' as in the earlier song, but now with taking downers so 'I feel nothing at all'. Other tracks are more positive about finding a way out of a rut, such as *Bruises On All My Illusions*, *Purple Zone* (a collaboration with the Pet Shop Boys) and closing track *New Eden*. The album also avoids being too depressing by its lyrics not always taking themselves seriously ('I feel like North Korea in the winter', 'It's all the fault of the media and all the fear they feed ya') and upbeat arrangements, particularly on *Nostalgia Machine* and *Purple Zone*. While *Happiness Not Included* isn't a concept album, its songs hang together as a commentary on how people can react to these uneasy times. The result is probably Soft Cell's best album since their first, and hopefully it won't be another twenty years until their next.

MIKE FOSTER



Is Mankind Doomed?

WHEN a religious group predicts the end of the world in the near future very few people sit up and take notice. But what happens when a group of scientists make it clear that they expect the breakdown of present society within the next fifty years? And, that when they are on about the Ecosphere they evince a deep knowledge of their subject and it seems that Man needs to wake up from the present dream and to do some serious thinking indeed. The group have formed a political movement called the Movement for Survival which they hope will become international. They may contest the next General Election. In the meantime they are trying to persuade governments, industrial leaders and trade unions throughout the world to face the facts and to take appropriate action while there is yet time. Their aim, according to their manifesto, *Blueprint for Survival*, is a new system of society seeking stability rather than expansion. (...)

On pollution the Doomwatchers make out an impressive case. Essential to the environment are such features as stability, organisation and complexity, but present trends suggest that "Industrial Man" is counteracting these basic requirements of



the ecosphere and is thus bringing about its ruination as a fertile means of life. Marx pointed out the trend years ago and since he wrote pollution has multiplied. But the ecologists mis-state the real cause of pollution, which is capitalist profit-motivated production. Instead, they point to certain characteristics and symptoms of capitalism such as expansion, urban drift, and the increased ratio of capital to labour (here they mean the non-profit-creating to the profit-creating part of capital). (...)

Another result of the ecologists' failing to face up to capitalist reality is that they appear to believe in miracles. By implication, they wish to retain the fundamentals of the present system; i.e. money, profit-making, capital, a ruled and a ruling class, yet they expect to freeze expansion and to substitute stability under it. They seem to have in mind a form of elitist society in which small self-sufficient and

self-regulating communities would take the place of large cities and centralised government. (...)

The sane and sensible method of using the ecological resources to meet the needs of all the people of the world is Socialism. (*Socialist Standard*, July 1972)

Socialist Party official logo Cotton Bags—on sale now

Price just £3.50 (£5 including UK P&P)



These stylish cotton bags come in black with the Socialist Party logo screen printed in white on one side and with a shortened web address.

They measure 38 x 42 cm and have two shoulder length cotton handles.

On sale now from The Socialist Party, 52 Clapham High Street, London SW4 7UN.

Price just £3.50—add £1.50 for UK P&P. Sent in cardboard packaging. Please supply name and address. For bulk or overseas orders please email spgb@worldsocialism.org or phone 0207 622 3811.

Wash bags if used frequently, but only in cold water and do not iron over design or tumble dry.

World Socialist Movement Online Meetings

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

JULY 2022 EVENTS

World Socialist Movement online meetings

Sundays at 19.30 (IST)

Weekly WSP (India) meeting

Sunday 3 July 11.00 GMT + 1 Zoom

Central branch meeting

Anyone wishing to join the meeting contact
spgb.cbs@worldsocialism.org to get an invite.

**Friday 8 July 19.30 GMT +1 Discord
Nationalism**

Opener: John Cumming

Friday 15 June 19.30 GMT + 1 Discord

The ideas of Rutger Bregman

Speaker: Paul Bennett

Friday 22 July 19.30 GMT + 1 Discord

Human Nature

Opener: Richard Field

Sunday 31 July 11.00

GMT + 1 Discord

Did You See the News?

General current affairs discussion

Host: Doug McLellan

Socialist Party Physical Meetings

CANTERBURY

Saturday 9 July from 12:00pm • Literature stall

Parade pedestrian precinct, CT1 2JL

More helpers welcome, to let us know to expect you or for more details:

Email: spgb.ksrb@worldsocialism.org Phone: 07971 715569

LONDON

Saturday 16 & Sunday 17 July from 12 noon • Lambeth Country Show

Brockwell Park, London SE24

The Socialist Party will have a stall at this event.

Saturday 30 July 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)

(Postponed from 25 June)

WEST COUNTRY

Saturday 16 & Sunday 17 July • Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival

Dorchester, Dorset

The Socialist Party will have a stall at this event

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 legal drama

THERE'S a trendy bar in my area which displays greetings and various other comments on its front hoarding so that they can be read by everyone going past. They sometimes cause a bit of a stir and a recent one certainly did. Large block capital letters said 'AMBER IS IN DEPP SHIT'. It was a reference of course to the celebrity legal case in the US between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. Most people will have cast it out of their minds by now, but the reactions it provoked show just how indicative matters like this are of the interests and priorities of many ordinary people in the kind of society we live in.

Nasty

Polls taken at the time suggested that many Americans were more interested in this legal drama than the war in Ukraine or what was being called a potentially historic ruling on abortion expected from the US Supreme Court. Each twist and turn of the trial, televised and livestreamed, was watched by millions of people, and many turned to social media, mainly to express support for Depp and vilify Heard. Heard declared that, apart from intense mockery, she faced hundreds of daily death threats, while on the TikTok platform the hashtag #justiceforjohnnydepp got around 19 billion views.

Locally to me, after the sign in the trendy bar was discussed on my local community Facebook page, the page was flooded with further comments. So many in fact that, after just an hour, the page administrator turned off further comments on the grounds that it was 'getting nasty'.

In the event, as readers will know, the prediction on the bar sign turned out correct, with Heard ordered to pay Depp some \$10M for defamation. As the verdict was announced, screams and chants of 'Johnny, Johnny, Johnny' erupted outside the court and Heard announced herself 'heartbroken'. Yet the verdict was a surprise to many people, given that, in a similar legal process between the same two parties in the UK not long before, the verdict had gone in her favour. In the US court Depp's legal team was said to have used a common defence tactic in sexual assault and domestic violence



cases known as 'Darvo', meaning 'deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender'. This strategy turns the tables on the victim, shifting the conversation away from 'did the accused commit abuse' to 'is the alleged victim believable'. This tactic is said to be often effective in trials involving domestic violence where juries can be persuaded that a female victim is herself guilty. This is said to happen less when the trial is in front of a judge alone, as happened in the UK, rather than with a jury. The judge will apparently better understand the tactics being used and so is less likely to be emotionally affected by the proceedings and more likely to take a sober, objective view of the evidence. Whether or not 'Darvo' was used to deliver the wrong verdict, there's no question that Heard was convicted in the court of public opinion.

Meaningless thrills

What to make of this? A recent book with the subtitle 'A Manifesto for a Life Beyond Capitalism' talks about how 'distraction technologies and the entertainment industry sell us meaningless thrills to patch over the pain'. And this seems an apt characterisation of the spectacle this trial offered to the public. One commentator remarked that the televising of the trial turned it into 'almost a sports game'. People's avid immersion in this spectacle does indeed seem reminiscent of the vicarious worshipping of, say, a football team or a tennis player that so many engage in, such worship serving as welcome relief from everyday lives of utter mundanity spent largely in the sale of their energies to an employer. If, in the sport context, the team or the player they support wins, they feel it as a victory for themselves, a form of power uncommon in a life usually experienced as powerless. It's not hard to see a similar process operating in the act of following

a public trial involving celebrities and of supporting one against the other. It provides an interlude of escape from the docility and routine that capitalism, with its worship of paid work, imposes on its subjects.

Alienation

'This is so intensely gross' was one of the few comments on that local community Facebook page that this writer was able to empathise with. But at the same time the 'grossness' of people's interest in this event should not be an occasion for condemnation of individuals. It should be seen as a lack of connection by people with the human beings immediately around them produced by the competitive and adversarial nature of the system we all live under. It should also be seen as an expression of the fundamental powerlessness of workers, from which those 'meaningless thrills' give some short-lived relief. The alienation from mutual cooperative activity inherent in obsession with celebrities – people they do not know personally and have nothing in common with – is a million miles away from a constructive use of the power and potential we all have to think and create for ourselves and to work usefully and collaboratively with one another.

Of course we do see that power and potential demonstrated in the many communal and collaborative activities that people manage to engage in despite – and in hopeful contrast with – the deadening uniformity the wage and salary system imposes on lives. It is this that will inform human activity in the genuinely democratic society of free access characterised by peaceful cooperation rather than intense competition that we call socialism.

HOWARD MOSS