



REVOLUTION

and the difficulty
of overthrowing
capitalism

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Introduction

Revolutionary Socialism is an emancipatory project, and in order to succeed, it must find positive means of realization and expression, as a *precondition* to its assumption of state power. For revolutions to succeed be they violent or peaceful, swift or protracted, they must be expressions of social forms that are already emergent or present within a society.

Consequently, the outstanding problem for socialists regarding revolution is by what means should they attempt to influence the trajectory of social development? Does this simply involve supporting and stimulating every positive expression of social dissatisfaction so that we might ride the crest of the revolutionary wave towards the shore of a new society, or does it mean considering what ways exist, here, within the bowels of the old society, to contribute towards the elaboration of institutions, of modes of thought, of reforms, which might enable a revolutionary seizure of power to ‘cut with the grain’ of social development, to realize socialism in much the same way that landowners and merchants in England at the end of the seventeenth century made commercial society seem not merely reasonable and just, but necessary for the progress of all mankind.

This does not mean revisiting what Karl Marx called feudal socialism,¹ or the utopian schemes of those who, in the nineteenth century, thought that capitalism could be eclipsed by model communities established to demonstrate, in practice, that socialism was both preferable and possible.² Neither does it mean toying with the idea that capitalism can

¹ In *The Communist Manifesto*, §III, Marx and Engels in a discussion of ‘Communist Literature’ review the various ways in which privileged social groups threatened by the emergence of capitalism sought to express support for the emergent working class in their struggle against the rise of capitalist modernity. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848, from the translation published in 1888, London: Verso, 1998, §III, pp.62-75.

² See Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 1880, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970; *The Communist Manifesto*, pp.72-75; Robert Owen’s ‘New View of Society’, 1813, and ‘Report to the County of Lanark’, 1821, in *Robert Owen: A New View of Society and other writings*, Introduced and edited by G. D. H. Cole, London: Dent, 1966, pp.14-90, 245-298.

be overcome by the accumulation of reforms, or by the piecemeal expansion of public ownership.³ It does mean, however, finding ways for the mass of the population to begin to embrace a concrete desire for social solidarity, and to develop a practical taste for the democratic management of manufacturing and the provision of services.

Above all it means fighting to win reforms, which enhance popular participation, mutualism, and cooperation, in the management and control of production, as a pre-condition to the seizure of state power, by those who would attempt to manage the entire economy by popular democratic methods.

This means that there can be no successful revolutionary development without wresting reforms from the powers that be. It means, also, that there can be no successful revolutionary politics without the development of practical suggestions for improvements in the way capitalist relations are presently regulated and managed – *on every question of the day revolutionaries must surely be able to put forward plausible and practical solutions to contemporary problems.*

The inability or rather refusal of revolutionary socialists to give some concrete shape and meaning to their conceptions of socialism has condemned them to the margins – prominent in struggles against war and in those to defend wages, working conditions, and welfare, but rarely seen taking a broader interest or a central role in attempting, beyond the level of slogans and newsprint rhetoric, to challenge the competence and capacity of the powers that be in the way that industry is run, wars are fought, houses built, or services provided. This confinement to protest, without engagement, guarantees that the great majority of working people will continue, *as they always have*, to regard revolutionary socialists as irrelevant.

It is ridiculous to argue that the problems of capitalism are solely the concern of the capitalists, and “nothing to do with us”. This kind of thinking leads socialists into the absurd position of insisting that it is only with the overthrow of capitalism, only *after the revolution*, that we’re going to know what should be done, and who should do it. This *abdication of the present* leads to the airy proposition that

³ See Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism: a criticism and affirmation*, 1899, New York: Schocken, 1961.

“It’ll be alright on the night” – it supports those revolutionaries who traditionally refuse to offer any practical perspective on the revolutionary future other than to say – “when the day dawns, the masses will decide”.⁴

This has bequeathed to us a situation in which we refuse practical participation in the political life of the society that we actually live in, in favour of an imaginary life determined by aspirations for a society that does not exist. In the meantime we confine ourselves to noisy outrage at the awful ways working people are treated, and argue the case for revolution, not merely failing to join-up-the-dots between protest and the revolutionary future, but insistently refusing to do so. This is why there is an entire ecology on the left of intimately related revolutionary groups who have excellent minimum and maximum positions, and nothing at all to tie them together, except arcane nonsense about the creation of ‘united fronts’ which are, from time to time, deployed to protect the nascent revolutionary parties from the slippery business of engaging with the here and now. This ensures that the Labour Party, bureaucratized trade unions, UKIP, and the Tory Party, are left to define and police what “politics” means, and are given a free hand to determine the parameters of political debate in society.

It is for these reasons it seems to me we need to overhaul our entire approach to politics and organization. We need to revisit what we mean by class, by exploitation, by democracy, by reforms, and by revolution. We need to get away from the caricature of capitalism we’ve been operating with. It does mean throwing out the baby’s bathwater, but not to worry, the baby hasn’t been in the tub for some time. We need to begin with a thorough interrogation of our rarely visited assumptions, because only when we’re clear about these, will we know what kinds of parties and institutions we need, and what we’ll have to do in order to develop and steer a revolutionary upheaval towards the prospect of success rather than the common ruin it has always brought with it in the past.

⁴ See a discussion of this reluctance to discuss the future shape of socialism in Don Milligan, *Raymond Williams: Hope and Defeat in the Struggle for Socialism*, Manchester: Online at Studies In Anti-Capitalism, 2007, pp.22-27.

Revolutions, bourgeois and otherwise

The word “revolution” has many and varied uses. In the field of politics it has been applied to everything from social upheavals that change which social layers are able to rule the roost, to *coup d'état* in which one small coterie takes power by replacing another to leave a country – *below the level of its ruling elite* – pretty much unchanged. To confuse matters, *coup d'état* have often taken place inside revolutionary tumults, which although they might have toppled an old order, had not yet arrived at a new distribution of wealth and power. Indeed most revolutions contain elements of this mixed character in which different social groups and parties vie for authority in the context of rippling waves of revolt among people determined to effect big changes in their lives, and in the way they are governed.

Things do, of course, get even more confusing. For example, during the Russian Revolution in February and March 1917 the autocratic rule of the Tsar was swept away by a combination of conspiracies among officers and prominent aristocrats, by mass desertions from the army, by peasant land seizures, the burning of manor houses, waves of strikes by railwaymen and factory workers, and by mutinies among rebellious soldiers and sailors. In the confusion the monarchy and its aristocratic bulwark collapsed, and were replaced by a ramshackle attempt at constitutional government. By September this novel regime had degenerated into a dictatorial republic led by Alexander Kerensky at the head of a five-man directorate. A month later the revolutionary directorate was in turn overthrown by the Bolshevik *coup d'état* known as the ‘October Revolution’. Try as it might, Russia could not escape autocracy. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, became Chairman of the Council of Peoples Commissars, and instituted rule by decree, bolstered by tens of thousands of armed insurgents drawn largely from the working class in and around Petrograd. In the context of civil war and foreign invasion, the communists resorted to the deployment of ‘red terror’,

and the destruction of all other revolutionary parties, including anarchist groups and independent trade unions. This left the Bolshevik dictatorship, and their secret police, in sole command. From early in 1918 the Central Committee of the Party, and from 1919, its executive committee, known in English as the “Politbureau”, exercised autocratic power throughout Soviet territory.

These were spellbinding events. Tens of thousands of workers were involved in one way or another in popular councils seeking to direct affairs and remake the country. Aristocrats were forced to clear snow from the streets, while working men made decisions. The world was turned upside down. In the countryside the peasants divided up great estates between themselves, village by village. Nothing like it had happened since the great revolution in France a hundred and thirty years before. The difference was that this time the urban labouring class, and their party of more than 300,000, was in the saddle. For the first time in history the common people had taken control of both an enormous territory, and of their own lives.

Or, so it seemed to millions throughout the world.

The truth was far darker than optimism would allow. The Bolshevik dictatorship, rapidly won the war against numerous counter-revolutionary armies, against social revolutionaries, against anarchists, workers’ rebellions, and peasant jacqueries, by subjecting the entire population to regulation by the police in what amounted to a regime of martial law. The result was a society in which the arbitrary power of the Tsar and his aristocracy, of Nicholas II’s ministries of police chiefs, bureaucrats, merchants, and bankers, was replaced by that of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) who initiated a rather more efficient and ruthless system of rule by repression.

However, little of this blunted the glamour and grandeur of what Lenin’s party had attempted. Their seizure of power in the coup d’état of October, their inauguration of economic arrangements, which dispossessed capitalists and aristocrats alike, and put public ownership at the heart of the economy would continue to dazzle and *entrance* millions, and did so even after it had been dragged for decades through the mud and gore by Felix Dzerzhinsky, Leon Trotsky, Semyon

Budyonny, and Joseph Stalin,⁵ and still does, even today, after it has all been brought to ruin. The audacity and élan of Bolshevism is hard to shake. So hard in fact that the far left in most countries of the world is, here in the 21st century, characterized by dozens of tiny parties and groups claiming apostolic succession from Bolshevism and from one or the other of the founders of the first Soviet State.

This means that ‘revolution’ is still conceived by many as it was in a country composed of a few industrial cities, home to vast factories, embracing at most three or four million workers, isolated in a sea of millions upon millions of peasants,⁶ watched over by priests and village elders, and by bailiffs and estate managers in the employ of tens of thousands of nobles, owing their lands and their allegiance to Nicholas II, Emperor and Tsar of all the Russias. This was a world in which industrialization was pulling all the old arrangements out of shape, exposing venerable institutions and ways of doing things to commercial competition, to the inducements of merchants, and the Midas touch of capital. It was already a society at the end of its tether, and it was a society in which the strategic control of the telephone exchange, the telegraph wires, heavily armoured cruisers, and of the railway junctions, were the key elements in maintaining a state’s dominion. The Tsar’s realm was a state ripe for disintegration that could be seized in a coup d’état the moment that the conspirators had achieved the transient support of most industrial workers, and of a majority of younger people living in urban centres.

The historical specificity of Russian social, political, and technical conditions, have given rise to a tendency among revolutionaries to concentrate upon a suite of theories and

⁵ Felix Dzerzhinsky (1877-1926) founder and director of the Bolshevik secret police agencies; Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) leader of the Red Army 1918-1922; Semyon Budyonny (1883-1973) Red Cavalry Commander and Marshal of the Soviet Union, and Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 1922-1952, ‘Prime Minister’ or Chairman of the Council of Ministers, 1941-1953.

⁶ In Russia in 1897 the population was said by the Imperial Population Survey to be 125,640,021. By 1917 the population had probably grown to around 166 million – that is a growth of over 40 million in the last twenty years of the Empire. It is thought that about ninety per cent of the population, or around 150 million people, lived and worked in the countryside. The class composition of the urban and rural population was extremely complicated; however the industrial working class numbered only a few millions heavily concentrated in Moscow, Petersburg, Odessa, and a small number of other centres.

interpretations, and to focus upon a set of epic moments or turning points, which enable them to both acknowledge the unique circumstances in which the Bolsheviks found themselves, and simultaneously, derive concrete lesson after lesson from Lenin or Trotsky's tactics, strategies, and the revolutionary organizational forms these men are thought to have endorsed.

The result has been the stranding of the modern revolutionary left in a mental space, composed of imaginary social structures, derived from Marxist 'science', strained and sieved through a mesh composed of what they think of as the practical and theoretical experiences of the first wave of Bolshevik leaders. As these socialists strive against sectarianism and their own irrelevance, even as they battle for unity and democracy, many remain trapped in the still slowly decaying half-light of the October Revolution.

The problems that this experience has given us are manifold, but above all, is a view of 'revolution' conceived of as a primarily *political event*, brought about by *political* intervention, in circumstances in which mass disaffection with the powers that be, boils over into popular assaults and challenges to the existing state of affairs – the government, courts, police, and so on. Many modern revolutionaries are rather like members of the Washington Consensus who believed that by invading Iraq and toppling Baghdad's statified economy they could inaugurate a free-trading bourgeois democracy! The truth is that social revolutions are 'social'. The political and military forces that overwhelm a state apparatus, and unseat the powers that be, are not the forces that can initiate fundamental changes in the social structure and economic life of a country. It may well be that rapid and sharp military and political action becomes necessary in order to permit or initiate change, but they are not, in themselves, the social revolution. A society has to be, not simply disintegrating, like Tsarist Russia, but one that is ready to absorb a social revolution, in a way that Russia was patently not. Perhaps a revolution that gave priority to measures which sought to incorporate the majority of the population – the peasants – into the civic life of the society might have been a more fertile response to the revolutionary crisis of 1917 than Bolshevism, which related to the majority of Russia's labouring masses, their habits, modes

of thought, and communal institutions, as obstacles on the road to progress and a brighter future.

We will never know. After all, history is not composed of ‘what ifs’.

We do know, however, that there have only been a few social revolutions, which have been broadly successful, both in consolidating existing social trends, and in accelerating the development of society in the direction desired by their principal participants. These are 1688 (England), 1776 (North American Colonies), and 1868 (Japan) – there may be others according to the criteria you wish to apply, but these revolutions achieved their goals whether you approve of them or not. The overriding issue here is that they were all revolutions in which political and military interventions were initiated in response to profound social changes that were already in train. They did not spring from economic or military collapse; they did not arise from disintegration of *ancien régimes*. To be sure they were, in each case, urgent, and spurred on by what were perceived of as external dangers but, were above all, fuelled by existing articulate and organized social forces composed of men and women pressing to break the bonds and restraints that were threatening or holding back the desired novel development of their society. It matters not that these revolutionaries might have thought of their radical actions as being intrinsically conservative or defensive like those who toppled the last Stuart King, James II and the last Shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, or the bold new men of Philadelphia – they were all of them social revolutionaries because they fought to bring political and military arrangements into a more effective and pleasing alignment with contemporary realities and desires.

Looked at in this way successful revolutions become a much more complex orchestration of political and military forces in association with the emergent institutions and practices created and desired by the forward thinking or progressive elements of a particular society. This, of course, is exactly how revolutionary socialists like to think of themselves. The outstanding difficulty that we face is how to become an emergent force capable of leading society in a new direction.

The leaders of emergent commercial societies, which in the fullness of time, were able to seize control of state power, were able to do so on the basis of the development of sophisticated cultures developed and expressed through institutions, some very old, but newly adapted to changed circumstances, some entirely novel. Through the development of law and commercial practice, through the creation of new financial instruments, new rules and new institutions, through the employment of technical innovations, and new forms of labour contract, they were able to stretch and pull social arrangements into more suitable shapes. They did not, in the first instance start out by dispossessing the propertied classes of their possessions, or gratuitously overturn institutional forms and practices for ideological reasons. They did not announce Year Zero, change the calendar, or clamp caps of liberty on reluctant or unwilling heads. On the contrary the successful bourgeois revolutionaries to whom I refer focused upon their core objectives. They were more than willing to deprive peasants of their livelihood by enclosing common land, to deprive Africans of their liberty, the Mohawk or the Seneca of their lives, and to consign samurai to decorative oblivion, in their pursuit and defence of *proper* bourgeois contract laws, the private ownership of property, and the development of trade and industry. But these forms and practices were largely already in existence – the purpose of revolutionary struggle for them was simply the freeing up of a process that had been maturing for many decades within the body of the old society.

We encounter a problem here of glamour – or rather the lack of it when compared to the glories of failure. Who could doubt the earth shattering success of the Great French Revolution of 1789 with its bold declaration of *The Rights of Man and the Citizen*,⁷ with its tumbrils, severed heads, and insurgent *levee en masse* setting all the thrones of Europe a tremble – but step back a little and ponder that after ten years of confusion bloodshed and terror, Napoleon had seized power, and it took France a further seventy years of instability and monarchical rule before the rather shaky Third Republic finally came into existence with the help of

⁷ *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, adopted by the National Constituent Assembly in 1789 and a later version adopted by the National Convention in 1793.

Prussia's royalist soldiery and the wholesale slaughter of the Communards.⁸

Even Toussant L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the heroic black leaders of the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue failed in their republican aspirations for the Haitian Revolution, both subsequently declaring themselves to be royal personages and monarchs. Dessalines despite his considerable successes against the armies sent out by the First Consul, Napoleon Bonaparte, was compelled by his attempt to maintain a plantation economy, to replace chattel slavery with a brutal feudal system of *corvée*, or conscription, for both field labourers and soldiers. Despite their visceral hatred of the slavery into which both men had been born, they were unable to abolish either servile labour, or monarchical and aristocratic forms of rule. Even before the island was condemned to two centuries of poverty and despair by French and American creditors, the revolutionaries had, despite their many victories, failed to fully emancipate their people – the social forms, technologies, or economic options to do so, simply did not exist during their time in the Caribbean.

Of course, the great Haitian revolt was not without positive effects, it led to Napoleon selling all French claims to greater Louisiana to the United States,⁹ and it made it abundantly clear to planters throughout the Caribbean that the days of the slave trade, and of slavery itself, were numbered. It fuelled in equal measure fear of slave revolt, harsher repression on plantations, and greatly strengthened the emerging struggle for emancipation throughout Britain, the Caribbean, and North America.

Even when revolutions fail they are not without positive effects.

But, the most important thing for us to bear in mind is that successful revolutions are merely the realization, through a combination of political and military means, of

⁸ King Louis XVI 1774-1792; First Republic 1792-1804; Emperor Napoleon I 1804-1814; Emperor Napoleon I briefly restored in 1815; King Louis XVIII 1814-1830; King Louis Philippe I 1830-1848; Second Republic 1848-1852; Emperor Napoleon III 1852-1870; Third Republic 1870-1940.

⁹ The 'Louisiana' of the Louisiana Purchase (1803) was a great swathe of territory in what is now the central United States extending from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border and from the middle of Colorado in the west to the borders of Wisconsin, Illinois, Tennessee, and Mississippi, in the east. Until its purchase this territory nominally belonged to France.

developments, which are *already in play*. In order to succeed the revolution must be maturing in its institutional forms and cultural presence *within the old society*, well before any attempt at seizing power is made.

Now for the bourgeoisie, concerned largely with legal and financial arrangements, with freedom from arbitrary or aristocratic government, with achieving equality for the propertied before the law, putting an end to various forms of communal land tenure or tribal usage, and replacing entailed labour with free wage labour, the building blocs of their new form of commercial society can begin to arise almost spontaneously, and only achieve conscious or defined form, when they bump up against older interests, and in so doing, make plain the need for reform and revolutionary innovation in government and the management of the state.

Now, this way of looking at revolutions presents revolutionary socialists with the problem that the achievement of their principal objectives presupposes the seizure of state power *before*, rather than *after*, the emergence of the desired socialist social forms and relations of production. The establishment of socialism is not simply the realization, in legal form, of something that has already come into existence, but marks a novel and violent rupture with the past. Hence the enduring appeal among revolutionary socialists of heroic iconography, more akin to that of France in 1793-1794, of Toussant L'Overture, of Paris 1871, of October 1917, of Barcelona 1936, of one bloody defeat after another.

Among revolutionary socialists there is no quiet celebration of success because there has been none. We have to make do with the quiet remembrance of antique defeats of the common people, like those led by the priest John Ball in the fourteenth century¹⁰ or that of Gerard Winstanley in the seventeenth,¹¹ who in turn must vie with the noisy assertion and romance of the doomed lads of *Les Misérables* as they

¹⁰ John Ball (1338-1381) was a Lollard Priest, who during the Peasants Revolt of 1381 is reported to have argued that God had intended all men to live and work in equality. In July of that year, after the collapse of the revolt, he was hanged, drawn, and quartered in the presence of Richard II.

¹¹ Gerrard Winstanley (1609-1676) was a radical English Protestant who, during the republican Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell was a "True Leveller" or "Digger" who led peasants to occupy and cultivate common land that had been enclosed by wealthy private landlords. Eventually, armed men hired by the landowners drove the Diggers off all the parcels of land they'd occupied.

fight on atop the barricades against the King of the French.¹² Whether it is the Sandinistas of Nicaragua, the Zapatistas of the Chiapas, Che Guevara in the Bolivian jungle, or Salvador Allende lying dead beside his AK-47 in La Moneda Palace, we have our revolutionary saints and heroes, but precious few victors.

This is because there is no necessary or vital relationship between the desperation and outrage of the working people at their exploitation and oppression by the elite, and the possibilities of success. Revolutions repeatedly break out because existing arrangements become intolerable for all concerned. The rulers can no longer rule in the old way, and the ruled can no longer tolerate their subject condition. It is interesting that almost all mass revolutionary upheavals have involved disastrous attempts by those in charge of society to institute radical changes in social arrangements and in the way that they govern. These innovations provoke radical subaltern classes to revolt, which in their turn open up the floodgates of mass discontent. And, it is then that the possibilities ushered in by the revolutionary destruction of an older order are tested as novel arrangements come face to face with underlying or emergent social structures. It is then that the white terror of the Duc de Magenta, of Denikin and Wrangel, of Pabst, Noske, and Ebert, of Franco, of Suharto, of Pinochet, and of Mohammed Reza and his nemesis, Ruhollah Khomeini¹³ (or the red terror of Felix

¹² *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo was published in 1862. It is a novel about the very poor, whose struggle led by artisans and students in Paris, culminates in the June Rebellion of 1832 against King Louis Philippe I. These were events, which Hugo witnessed, and the popular musical and movie are based on Hugo's fictional story and account of the insurrection.

¹³ Marshal Patrice de Mac Mahon, Duc de Magenta (1808-1893) led the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871, and organized the massacre of the Communards; Anton Ivanovitch Denikin (1872-1947) and Baron Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel (1878-1928) were both generals in the White Armies that attempted to crush the Bolsheviks; Waldemar Pabst (1880-1970) worked with the socialist politicians Gustav Noske (1868-1946) and Friedrich Ebert (1871-1925) to crush the German Revolution and were directly involved in commissioning the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in 1919; Francisco Franco (1892-1975) led the 1936 military rebellion that crushed the Spanish Republic in 1939; General Suharto (1921-2008) led the anti-communist purge in Indonesia that resulted in the murder of some 500,000 left wing people; Augusto Pinochet (1915-2006) led the coup d'état which overthrew the elected socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile; Mohammed Rezā Shāh Pahlavī (1919-1980) was the Iranian monarch who suppressed the Communist Party and violently crushed all opposition to his rule until he was overthrown in the Revolution of 1979; Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989) was the Supreme Leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution

Dzerzhinsky, Semyon Budyonny and Leon Trotsky), come into play, as the revolutionary combatants on the ground attempt to pull political and economic arrangements into alignment with what they regard as social realities, or as emergent social forces.

In every case revolutions succeed or fail in the degree to which they truly represent the societies whose rule they contest. If the trajectory of social development, and the real relations of power, is with them, they will succeed, if not, they will fail. Or, as in the case of the Bolsheviks and the Communist Party of China, be pulled so out of joint by the revolution and its aftermath, as to become *in the act of the revolutionary transformation of society*, either its negation, or the harbinger of a new exploitative formation.

This means that the tendency of socialists, and particularly of radical socialists, to welcome each, and every, social upheaval and the revolutionary potential that they might contain, must surely be tempered by the constant attempt to ascertain whether a revolutionary challenge to the existing state of affairs might result in the positive confirmation of an emergent tendency towards socialism, a consolidation and enhancement of social solidarity, or simply be a movement prompted by the optimistic desperation of those who find themselves in the midst of a destructive social explosion. Very often socialists have been faced with a contradictory situation in which the ‘inevitability’ of social dislocation has been paired with a voluntarism on the part of revolutionaries, to brew a lethal cocktail composed of fateful heroism, indeterminate social forces, and heady enthusiasm. The result has usually been the massacre of working people on a truly grand scale as novel rightwing forces refashion the *ancien regime* into a structure more suitable to the emergent social conditions.

responsible for tens of thousands of summary executions and the imprisonment of as many as 30,000 political prisoners.

Revolutionizing Social Relations

There is nothing new or recent about the manner in which social relationships are constantly revolutionized by the improvement of productive techniques and machinery in capitalist society. Indeed perpetual technical innovation is a defining characteristic of this kind of society. Before the emergence of commercial society towards the close of the seventeenth century our technology developed very slowly indeed. Improvements were few and far between; typically they took a very long time to be dispersed within a given society and between different societies. This was not simply an unwillingness to try new things, it probably had much more to do with the anxiety associated with abandoning tried and tested methods for something that might not work, and might simply prove to be a costly mistake, in societies that lived on or near the margin of existence. Consequently, the room of error was very narrow indeed, a single failed harvest, an outbreak of disease in crops or livestock, or some other occasional misfortune might often result in famine and a large number of deaths. Conservatism in working methods and technique was most likely the result of this vulnerability.

Agricultural techniques and animal husbandry remained unchanged for centuries together. Craft skills employed in manufacture were often closely guarded secrets among groups of artisans who spent many years acquiring the arcane knowledge associated with their trade. This was because in the absence of patent and copyright protection it was necessary for artisans to restrict knowledge of their working methods and techniques in order to preserve their share of whatever trade they were engaged in. This also, of course, would have had the effect of restricting the scope of any improvements and innovations that were attempted; open discussion of working practices or advantageous innovations would be discouraged beyond the confines of an individual workshop, guild or town.

There were, of course, throughout history striking technical innovations and achievements, particularly in

metallurgy, ceramics, in buildings and architecture, ship construction, horse bridles, and in ploughs, cloth manufacture, in dyeing, in tanning, in the manufacture of weapons, other tools and implements, in articles made from glass. Indeed, the inventions like the water and windmill, more efficient pumps, the wine press, and by the fourteenth century, clockwork, and by the late fifteenth century, the printing press, all foreshadowed later developments.

However, before the advent of capitalist society the only motive power was human muscle, wind, water, and draught animals like bullocks and horses. Machines like spinning wheels or looms were operated by hand, and relatively inefficient. Apart from grain ground into flour in a water or windmill all manufactured articles were fashioned by hand in long, often laborious, processes which required many years of specialised training.

Consequently, clothes, shoes, hats, bedding, utensils, nails, chains, rope, pins, wooden boards for floors or furniture, tiles, bricks, ironwork, quarried stone, almost anything you can think of, was immensely costly. Everything was the product of hard physical labour, whether laundering linen, scrubbing floors, harvesting root vegetables, or sowing crops. Every productive task or activity inevitably consumed large amounts of human labour and energy.

Despite this laborious reality, until the development of capitalist relations of production the need for the invention of labour saving devices was not urgently felt. In circumstances where most labour was servile in the form of slavery or serfdom, or in freer conditions where the labourers' relationship to their landlord or employer was simply held together by bonds of custom and practice, hiring was not by the minute, by the hour, or even by the day. Agricultural labourers, stockmen and shepherds, ploughmen, dairymaids, and the like, might be hired annually or by the half year. Skilled artisans might be apprenticed for many years at a time. People's productive activities were also often inseparable from their family and domestic arrangements as servants or as independent householders. In any event

the value of their work was not calculated in minutes or by the hour.

These age-old relationships between master and man, between the mistress and her servants and workpeople, gradually fell away or into disuse as more commercial relations of production took hold. This is because as trade and commerce came to dominate production entirely – the profits realized from the trading of commodities became the dominant motive for producing anything – the efficiency of the labourer, and the price of his or her labour, became a critical factor in the intensely competitive relationships that were beginning to emerge. Labour itself began to become a commodity as the manner in which employers began to estimate or calculate a price for each element of labour purchased. Wages began to be calculated by the day and then by the hour.¹⁴

In these circumstances developing practices and procedures and devices, which would reduce the outlay on wages, reduce the amount of costly and costed labour involved in the manufacture of any particular product, gradually became the abiding concern of all landlords, manufacturers and mine owners. This consideration, together with improved access to raw materials, conferred by improved machinery and means of transport, redoubled interest in efficiency.

Throughout the eighteenth century in England and Holland improvement (what we would now call “efficiency”), in relation to land use and production techniques developed as a key conceptual element in circumstances in which competitive market relations began to emerge and to increase the volume and value of production. The struggle to make every acre of land productive, to watch keenly that every hour of paid work was performed in full, and in the most effective manner, resulted in much closer calculation in estate management, and in much greater surveillance in the workshop and manufactory. Attention to detail in the

¹⁴ See E. P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism’, *Past and Present*, No. 38, December 1967, p.56-97.

use of all resources, particularly that of human labour gradually came to dominate the production process.

As you may imagine these developments spontaneously produced a great interest in labour saving devices, procedures and techniques. Innovations, which would reduce labour costs, by increasing the productivity of each hour paid for, became matters of great concern to employers. Of course, such innovations involved much trial and error and were intrinsically costly but through the course of the eighteenth century, principally in England, large scale improvements in agriculture, mining, metallurgy and in the organization of manufacturing, shipping and transport, generated sufficient wealth for both colonial expansion and exploitation, which in turn paid for the further development of a host of labour saving devices, particularly greatly improved looms, spinning wheels, artificial waterways, and steam engines for pumps and for driving looms and other devices.

Consequently, by the closing decades of the eighteenth century the first revolution in industrial technologies was underway, steam power spread rapidly to many branches of manufacture, thence to transport, and finally to agriculture. The productivity of human labour was vastly increased by improved animal husbandry, and by the growing sophistication of machines and by perpetual revolutions in technique. Competition compelled incessant improvement, incessant invention, and an incessant drive to reduce the cost of labour stored within each product.

The sewing machine perfected during the 1840s in America is perhaps one of the most startling devices in this respect. Imagine neatly sewing by hand a hem on a yard of cloth. Then imagine doing the same job with a Singer sewing machine. Inventions like this, when combined with cloth woven rapidly and efficiently on power looms, resulted in huge falls in the price of clothes and footwear. Savings of this sort have continued to characterise capitalist development ever since.

Not many years ago, for example, during the third quarter of the twentieth century, the determination of discounts available to a company's clients, might take

a room full of clerks endlessly working through thousands of invoices making hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of separate calculations with cumbersome mechanical calculators. Now, one formula, in one cell, of an Excel spreadsheet, does the job automatically, leading to astronomical gains in the productivity of labour. Labour saving on this scale has been occurring in more or less all sectors of production across the entire economy.

These kinds of developments are unparalleled in human history. Before the emergence of entire societies dominated by the production of goods specifically for exchange upon regional, national, and world markets, and a labour force typically paid wages in money at a price calculated by the hour, technical improvement was episodic and slow.

The deluge of innovation and the seemingly unceasing revolution in productive techniques, methods, and organization, are not the product of increased intelligence. We have no reason to suppose that people were not as smart or as capable before the emergence of capitalism. However, the rise of commercial society, by introducing a mode of economic life founded on ceaseless competition, created the kind of social relations that cannot function without perpetual material growth and perpetual innovation.

This aspect of capitalist development subjects the life of the working people to incessant change. It has successively created and destroyed many different kinds of life over and over again. A bargee on the canal path with one narrow boat, pulled by one horse, could replace a dozen men with a hundred pack animals. The dismay of packmen and peddlers, or the fellow in charge of a train of packhorses, might well be imagined as the newly opened canal destroyed their way of life. Similarly the artisans and handloom weavers of the first two decades of the nineteenth century when confronted by machines that could reduce the number of labourers needed to perform a particular task from thirty or forty to one overnight, or

even to none, were driven to desperate violence against the bosses' infernal engines.¹⁵

So it is that in a single lifetime, during the second half of the twentieth century, typesetters, typists, dockers, firemen on the steam engine footplate, the stoker below the decks of a ship, filing clerks, comptometer operators, dolls eye switchboard workers, and the boys who, during my youth, used to get up early to light the coal fires in railway station waiting rooms, the milkman, the coal man, the rag and bone man, and the telegram boys, have joined all the other ghosts of workers past. Even where the job titles have survived the content of the job has changed out of all recognition. New tasks and new occupations have arisen to take their place, as particular occupations and even entire branches of industry have disappeared. Each innovation has brought the need for new skills to be acquired, a different tempo of work to be contended with, a different kind of lifestyle, and has demanded a generally better educated, more sophisticated, more mobile, and more flexible workforce.

This, of course, is not simply a technical matter, because different kinds of labour process and different kinds of work bring with them new modes of life. People live in different ways, the arrangement of their housing, their family life, their clothing, pastimes, and the most intimate aspects of their lives are irretrievably altered by electrification, by the closure of coal fields, by containerization, by the arrival of supertankers, the opening of oceanic oil fields, by computerization, and by the digitalization of document storage, of music, movies, and communications, by the use of bar codes, by radio frequency tags, by new systems of logistics, by new materials, by the Internet, the World Wide Web, and by social media.

All this means that working people today will, by and large, engage with the labour process and the world around them in radically different ways from that of their parents and grandparents. The assumptions

¹⁵ Innovation can and does repeatedly render particular steps in the production process, along with the specialized machines and the skills of their operators, entirely redundant. See the extensive historical sources on the Luddites and the Combination Acts at Marxists.org.

and attitudes, the social and cultural outlook of young workers is likely to be very different from that of the generation of workers who rose to adulthood maybe twenty or thirty years ago. Each new generation has, of course, always been boldly different from their parents, if for no other reason because they are more lively and vigorous than older people. But, technical and cultural innovation in capitalist society, by accelerating and deepening changes in the labour process, transforms all aspects of people's lives, in a manner which widens the gulf between the experience of generations as never before.

Class Relations

So the working class is a product of capitalism. It is fashioned and perpetually refashioned by the needs and demands of capital. This is often forgotten by those people in the habit of talking about 'The Working Class', or even worse, those who use the shorthand, 'The Class'. *Classes are not things*. They are constantly shifting constellations of people who are distinguished by a similar relationship to the means of production, but who often live radically different kinds of lives from each other, and consequently, occupy radically different places in the society regarding cultural attitudes, consumption, political instincts, and the exercise of power. The cultural signature and the actual texture of the class relations lived by working people are in a state of constant kaleidoscopic movement that cannot be easily pinned down or captured accurately by a static formula or category.

Class is a perplexing notion in capitalist society. It is the source of considerable sociological research and speculation. There is a great *to-and-fro* between a person's 'objective' class position, and their 'subjective' understanding of their own place within the 'class system'. There is a kind of parlour game in which people award themselves and others their appropriate place within an imaginary 'class system' as if classes were simply composed of aggregates of appropriate individuals ranked in some kind of social or cultural

hierarchy. The ‘class system’ appears to be a profoundly contradictory phenomenon; it is a robust hierarchy, composed of radically unstable layers or elements.

This confusion is compounded by a radical lack of agreement about the architecture of this hierarchy and the number, composition, and stability of its tiers or layers. There is not even agreement that class differences actually exist. To the dismay of many socialists, some people argue that we live in a “classless” society or in one in which we all belong to the same class described, according to personal taste, as “the working class” because most of us have to work, or as “the middle class” because most of us aspire to something called ‘middle class values’.

There is a mass of different cultural associations attached to the different class labels in circulation which certainly strengthen the idea that a person’s class identification is more of a voluntary matter associated with personal aspirations and the form of one’s cultural consumption: the kind of movies watched, clothes worn, holidays taken, newspapers read, and our taste in furnishings, pictures and music, all orchestrated by our personal demeanour, way of speaking, sense of humour, table manners and much else.

This cultural matrix gives rise to a semiotic system in which people can be ‘placed’ in their appropriate class position as “pond life”, underclass, working class, middle class, upper middle class, upper class, posh, celebs, and a mass of sub-categories, including the rural ‘toffs’ various urban tribes, and everybody from ‘Hooray Henrys’ and ‘Sloans’, to classy bohemians, and grungey squatters. It is a shifting cast of characters and classifications that change in a kaleidoscopic manner around the perennial labels of *working*, *middle*, and *upper* class.

The problem arises because of the dynamic and fluid character of capitalist society in which technology and the organization of the labour process is constantly changing the nature of the broader social composition; as large numbers of people are shifted from blue collar to white collar occupations, and as people who were

formerly from the countryside move into an urban setting, older arrangements and assumptions dissolve and are replaced by new associations and aspirations.

This process, when added to the growing wealth, both absolute and relative, of working people in England from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards has played havoc with ideas of class associated with consumption. Edwardian ladies and gentlemen were often appalled by the pretensions of shop girls and lowly clerks, and even housemaids on their day off, aping their 'betters' by adopting the fashions and manners of those far above them in the social scale. This can be seen most recently with the proliferation of luxury brands among people who are supposedly far too vulgar to really appreciate their subtle quality, and who were until recently far too poor to be able to compete with the upper middle class and upper class consumers of luxury goods. This has thrown the designers and promoters of brands such as Burberry and Louis Vuitton into something of a pickle as they try to maintain the special association of their products with an elite of discerning *cognoscenti* as distinct from mobs of *chavs* and *hoi polloi*, who might ultimately give the brand a bad name.

Before the growth of commercial or capitalist society social distinctions were much more caste-like. Of course even in feudal or aristocratic societies people rose and fell within the social order. Relatively modest gentlemen farmers could, and sometimes did, rise into the aristocracy. The sons of artisans could, and did, rise to be leading churchmen and wealthy politicians. Then, as now, people from very humble beginnings were able to climb the social hierarchy of wealth and power. The principal difference between then and now, however, is the absence of any legal or formal distinction between classes.

Class relations within capitalist society, particularly within modern or liberal democratic societies have no legal status. Everybody is equal before the law, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, income or social position. This has tended to give class and the class structure a much less defined or formal status than the social orders, which existed in pre-capitalist

societies, where boundaries between the different orders, ethnicities, races and castes often had legal force or at least the sanction of venerable and often insurmountable social or religious prejudices.

Marxists have tended towards the view that modern class relations are determined by one's relationship to the means of production. Hence the capitalist class is identified by their ownership of productive property, and by their capacity to use that property, which is often called "capital", to employ other people. In contrast the working class is composed of people who only own consumption goods like the house or flat that they live in, or their car or other possessions; the working class is made up of people who do not own capital and consequently have to work for capitalists, for the state, for local authorities, or charities and co-operatives, in return for wages.

During the nineteenth century Marxists and others tended to think that the division of society between two classes, the capitalist class on one side, and the working class on the other, would greatly simplify the class structure; they imagined the formation of two great hostile classes facing one another in irreconcilable conflict and struggle. However, things have not turned out like this.

As technology advanced, and capitalist society developed, public and commercial institutions became larger and more complicated; the demand for professionals and technicians of all kinds grew, and their greatly increased numbers and status complicated, rather than simplified, the class relations. To this was added the fact that working people were required, as capitalism deepened its roots, to raise the level of their technical expertise and their general level of culture. Mass literacy was required, close attention to personal hygiene and grooming, and a more sophisticated level of knowledge and understanding of the world and its ways was demanded of those entering the labour market. This resulted in the gradual incorporation of working people into bourgeois society through the lengthy struggle to improve mass education and hous-

ing, and through the acquisition of political rights, the right to vote and the right to organize trade unions and neighbourhood organizations of all kinds.

So, the composition of classes, and the relations between them, became more complicated as the glaring cultural distinctions of old were softened somewhat by free schooling, the growing cultural sophistication of the working class, and the deepening of democracy. At the same time divisions both *within* the working class and *within* professional and technical occupations also became more complicated with the multiplication of different levels of skill and income demanded within particular trades and professions. This phenomena was further compounded in Western Europe and North America during the forty years following the Second World War as labour employed in mining and heavy industry began to decline and those employed in clerical and technical occupations began to increase; this resulted in the children of millions of manual workers being incorporated into the college and university systems of higher education, into ‘salaried’ occupations, monthly pay, and in their introduction to the mysteries of personal bank accounts and the payment of income tax.¹⁶

The dense matrix of social and political institutions in which industrial workers had lived, non-conformist churches and chapels, sports associations, working men’s clubs and institutes, trades councils, and trades union branches; Labour, Communist, and Cooperative Party local organizations, and clubs and societies of all kinds, have faded away. Many of these institutions, of course, continue to exist but in such radically changed circumstances as to be almost unrecognisable; they no longer constitute the cultural heart of neighbourhoods composed, as they were in the past, almost entirely of manual workers and their families. Consequently, as the needs of capital – the needs of modern business and

¹⁶ Before the mid sixties working class people were paid their wages in cash in little buff envelopes; by and large manual workers and those engaged in routine clerical labour did not have cheque books or bank accounts. Mass retail banking, and payment of wages by bank credit developed relatively slowly, only becoming general during the eighties.

technical organization have changed – the working class has been reconfigured and the industrial working class has lost its distinctive cultural presence as the political articulation of its interests, first faltered, and finally died away.

This has strengthened the idea that class has become irrelevant and that class conflict has become *passé*; as Tony Blair told the Labour Party Conference in Blackpool in 1996: “Forget the past. No more bosses versus workers. You are on the same side. The same team. Britain united. And we will win.” This, of course, was nonsense then, and it’s quite blatantly nonsense now. It’s the kind of thing that only a millionaire politician could say and expect to be believed. We all occupy radically different positions in the class structure and while it is perfectly true that the interests of employees may often coincide with those of their employers, they do not in some generally applicable sense share the same interests, worries, or concerns. On the contrary, the decisions of employers, taken *exclusively* on behalf of shareholders (as they are required by law to do), often impact very badly indeed upon their employees.

In a country like England, and in Britain generally, there are also intractable class divisions expressed in the education system where schools and universities are broadly ranked on the basis of their material, scholarly, and intellectual resources. It goes without saying that the children of those with substantial amounts of capital, those of parents in positions of prominence and leadership in the professions and state institutions go to the best schools and universities. At school, the privileged attend classes of no more than ten and often fewer; at university they enjoy one-to-one tuition or very small group seminars. Consequently, these young people are encouraged to work harder and to develop greater skills of self-organization and discipline in the context of institutions that make greater and more measured intellectual demands upon them.

By contrast the children of the mass of working people have access most readily to schools and universities of much poorer quality in terms of material

resources and of the ratio of teachers to students. This mass provision is of variable quality ranging from the excellent to the truly appalling.

The class distinctions and prejudices, which spontaneously arise as a consequence of these divisions, together with objective differences in the resulting skills and abilities possessed by the young people sieved through this educational strainer, often stay with them for life. They are made worse by the suggestion that the glittering prizes awarded to those who attend the best schools and universities are in some way merited because they are naturally more intelligent and deserving than those who go to ordinary schools and inferior universities, or indeed to no universities of any kind. This is, in fact, the most pernicious aspect of class relations in modern or liberal democratic capitalist societies where inherited family advantages and inherited wealth are routinely camouflaged as being the result simply of 'merit' and 'meritocratic' systems of assessment.

Of course, many people of modest means continue to make their way into the professions and even into the capitalist class despite the numerous obstacles, which stand in their way. However, this does not mean that class and class distinctions are irrelevant any more than the re-election of Barack Obama to the Presidency can be taken to mean that Black or Hispanic people, or the children of poor white parents, do not face enormous obstacles blocking their entrance into the professions or into the managerial and employing ranks of society.

So class continues to matter a great deal, it continues to shape the life chances of many millions of people in the wealthy capitalist countries. Perhaps the easiest way of understanding the class structure is to think about the nature of a person's occupation, as much as their income, and as much as their ownership of capital. The working class can be thought of most usefully as all those people who do routine manual or clerical labour – people who have little or no say in the tempo or the organization of their day's work. The middle class consequently, can best be thought of as those people who have more control, responsibility,

and input, into the structure of their working day and/or the terms of their employment; middle class people have a large measure of control over how they perform their jobs and may have access to professional organizations and institutions capable of controlling or supervising entrance to their profession.

Consequently, there are huge variations *within* classes and *between* classes, just as there are enormous numbers of tiny capitalists with only one or two employees, who in some abstract sense can be said to occupy the same class position as those employing tens of thousands of workers. The truth is that class relations in capitalist society represent a large shifting social terrain in which people simultaneously occupy many different and contradictory positions. For example, millions of workers own capital in the form of savings in building societies, banks, and pension funds. Some workers may even have bought a second house or flat, which they rent out to tenants. Some capitalists own very little capital and have had to put up their family's house as collateral against their bank loans. Indeed, in the 'private sector' your boss is most likely to be a small capitalist with fewer than twenty or thirty employees with whom you have personal contact on a daily basis.¹⁷ In the 'public' sector your supervisors or managers are likely to be drawn from a range of different professional groups, or may be simply recruited, by promotion and competitive staff development routes, from the general labour force.

It will be readily seen from all this that modern capitalist society cannot in any strategic political or economic sense be understood as the product of class struggle. Conflicts most certainly exist between people who are differently situated within the hierarchy of income, education, occupation and power. But, it is not

¹⁷ In the UK at the start of 2009 there were 4.8 million private enterprises employing 22.8 million people. Almost all of these enterprises (99.3 per cent) were small (0 to 49 employees). Only 27,000 (0.6 per cent) were medium sized (50 to 249 employees) and 6,000 (0.1 per cent) were large (250 or more employees). Table 1: Number of enterprises, employment and turnover by number of employees, UK private sector, start of 2009. Statistical Press Release, URN 10/92, Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 13 October 2010.

at all clear that these conflicts can be said to coalesce around the classes defined in communist, socialist, or anarchist rhetoric as the ‘working class’ or the ‘capitalist class’ or the ‘middle class’, or even around the similar categories which have emerged from traditional forms of Marxist theory. It is true that Marxists have often designated particular social movements as ‘*objectively*’ ‘working class, or ‘*objectively*’ reactionary, as a way of dismissing the importance or relevance of their actual social composition in order to achieve ‘a better fit’ between their theoretical constructions and the world itself.

Some modern Marxists like Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have attempted to conceive of the aggregate of modern working people as a more diffuse social formation to which they have given the name “multitude”.¹⁸ By this means they clearly hope to elude the historical limitations of the ‘working class’ as earlier Marxist thinkers and militants have conceived it. But this move is not quite as radical a shift as it seems at first sight as Antonio Negri has demonstrated by insisting that the “multitude” is simply the modern form or instantiation of the working class.¹⁹ The grounds for this theoretical move to the “multitude” remain important, however, as a way of incorporating many different elements of the productive population from women working in the home, to those engaged in new occupations and activities like software and website designers, who might appear to have no cognates in the older Marxist conceptions of the class structure.

Regardless of these conceptual manoeuvres, social conflicts have not, throughout the history of capitalist society, ever corresponded in any overwhelming or decisive sense to class lines or class loyalties, determined by “the relationship to the means of production” of those involved. Great social movements and up-

¹⁸ See Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000, *passim*. And Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005, *passim*.

¹⁹ See Antonio Negri, ‘Multitude or Working Class’ posted on Libcom.org at <http://libcom.org/library/multitude-or-working-class-antonio-negri>, accessed February 5, 2010.

heavals have always been composed of a complicated admixture of different classes and social forces or only of fragments or sections of particular classes with a sprinkling of support from other classes.²⁰

Despite the rich iconography of class struggle on the left, and exhaustive historical accounts of strikes, riots, insurrections, and communes, and of the counter measures taken by soldiers, magistrates, and police, often involving hard-fought battles, and armed conflict between ‘classes’, there is little evidence that the forces marshalled in such ‘anti-capitalist’ conflicts were actually ‘class’ forces; when looked at more closely, one is constantly struck by the sectional character of the social elements involved. By and large, throughout the history of capitalism, the defence of private property, whether, in the form of capital, or consumption goods, forms the keystone in the arch of bourgeois or capitalist society, and unites most people, irrespective of their class position, around a range of fundamental commitments to the bourgeois state and capitalist relations. *The conflicts between demands for more social insurance, or for more freedom for private capital do not have a class character; they divide all social classes and sections within classes to a greater or lesser degree.*

One can only conclude that classes continue to exist, and that one’s class position might often have a determining influence on the course of one’s life, but that classes do not seem to possess any decisive relevance in the political life or direction of wealthy capitalist societies. They form an important constitutive part of everybody’s social experience, and inform many of our social assumptions and personal calculations, but they do not permit us to articulate any general demands or express any wider loyalty or class commitments beyond the level of nostalgic mytholo-

²⁰ Even in the contemporary struggles in Greece it is clear that the sections of the working class mobilizing against the government’s austerity measures are disproportionately concentrated in public employment and government services. On the other hand, large numbers of workers in the private sector are prepared to side with the socialist government and with small proprietors and capitalists in support of budget cuts designed to stabilize the economy. This kind of picture has been replicated in the Irish Republic and in a number of other modern economies faced with large debts and fiscal crisis.

gies associated with yesteryear or with our own biographies.

None of this militates against the revolutionary socialist conception that the mobilisation of working people is the key to transforming the tempo and trajectory of social development. None of this argues against the centrality of working people to the prospect of revolutionary change, and eventually to the seizure of state power. It does mean, however, that we need to engage with working people across the vast social terrain from the working class to the petit bourgeoisie with a full recognition of the radically different kinds of lives and concerns which both trouble and motivate different sections of society.

The likelihood of winning people over to the need for revolutionary socialist position has got little or nothing to do with their objective position within the social structure. If allegiances followed some simple conception of ‘class interests’ the Tories would never have been elected, and fascism would never have come to power, or achieved popularity anywhere in the world. Where somebody is in the social hierarchy, how much he or she’s got saved, or the size of their pension pot, does not determine in some direct or linear sense, the nature of their political outlook, or their attitude to a specific social crisis, or what they think needs to be done to make society better and more harmonious. It is true, of course, that if people find themselves in severe financial difficulties or in great hardship, they are likely to develop a heightened sense of injustice – and to become more extreme, or even irate – but they can just as easily express that by becoming staunch Labour, a right wing Tory, a militant member of UKIP, a fascist, a revolutionary socialist, or a LibDem member determined to do something about fisheries policy. This is precisely why we need to develop a mode of politics that can appeal to working people of all sorts and conditions.

For example most working class people are not ‘poor’ and do not think of themselves as such. It is highly unlikely that most petit bourgeois people, from owner cabdrivers to window cleaners, independent

tradesmen, and small employers, think of themselves as ‘middle class’, although quite a few schoolteachers and other ‘well-placed’ members of the working class often do.

This is more than a ‘subjective’ knockabout. Real material differences are expressed both within and between classes by these subjectivities, differences that critically affect how people conceive of their political role and how they can be effectively approached by revolutionary socialists.

Exploitation

Discussions of class inevitably bring us to the question of exploitation. In general or popular use the word “exploitation” means merely taking unreasonable advantage of someone. Consequently, it has many and varied uses. It can be applied to situations in which people have very poor wages or very bad working conditions. The word is often applied to employers or supervisors, who insist upon making demands of employees or subordinates, which are regarded as generally unreasonable by those on the ‘receiving end’. “Exploitation” can even be applied to interpersonal relations in circumstances where a friend or a partner uses their social, emotional, or erotic power to control or manipulate those around them. And, it seems to be universally applied to those who are very poor anywhere in the world; they are routinely referred to as being exploited irrespective of their actual circumstances or of their relationship to employers or landlords.

In the Marxist tradition, however, the word exploitation has a much more precise meaning. When applied to pre-capitalist relations it simply means the extraction of surplus wealth from the direct producers over and above any amount deemed biologically and culturally necessary for their maintenance. So, peasants or slaves were exploited because any surplus wealth, which they produced in the form of crops, textiles, or other manufactured articles, was directly appropriated

or seized by their landlords, masters, or owners. Exploitation, in this pre-capitalist sense, was understood in a fairly simple and direct manner regardless of the form it assumed. Of course God, or gods, of one kind or another, invariably ratified a ruler's authority, and that of his princes and satraps, and their underlings. Complex hierarchies of obligation and obedience tied ruler and ruled together into the kind of social relationships in which wealth was expropriated from the labourers and artisans and given to the 'high born'. Whether this wealth was appropriated in the form of rent, taxes, tithes, or fines, in money or in kind, it was the confiscation of the surplus produce, whatever that was, by the rulers whoever they were.

When Marxists discuss *capitalist exploitation* the theoretical focus shifts from the extraction of surplus wealth in this relatively direct sense to the more complicated idea of "surplus value". Under capitalism Marxists argue, exploitation takes the form of the expropriation of "surplus value". Surplus value is produced when workers make commodities whose value is greater than their costs of production – including the wages of those who made them.

For example, in the course of a day the worker makes one hundred cameras, and is paid £125 in wages. The other costs involved in making one hundred cameras, including materials, machinery, equipment, buildings, rent, and shipping, amount to £11,550. So costs, plus labour, amount to £11,675 for the production of the hundred cameras. The cameras are then successfully sold for £136.99p each. So, the capitalist receives £13,699 in return for the cameras. From this sum he must deduct the costs for producing the next hundred cameras, leaving him with £2,024, from which he must pay £467.50p in interest on his loans, and save £856 for research and development, advertising and promotion; this leaves him with a handsome return of 6% (or £700.50p) on his original investment for himself and his shareholders, if he has any.

This final sum left over after the profits have been divided between replacement and reinvestment, interest, research, and promotion – this £700.50p – is

the surplus value. For the Marxist it is the extraction of this surplus value from the labour of the worker, which constitutes exploitation. For Marxists exploitation only exists when surplus value is being produced by workers and appropriated by their employers. This is because according to Marxist theory this surplus value is produced by labour; it is not produced by the raw materials, or by the ingenuity, organizational skills, or the risk-taking initiatives of the employer, it is entirely produced by the worker who was paid £125 for their day's labour which has in turn produced an extra or "surplus value" to the tune of £700.50p which is then legally appropriated by the capitalist, because the capitalist owned (or had borrowed) the initial outlay of £11,675.

It is important to remember that according to this theory it does not matter whether the good or commodity being produced is a camera, a computer programme, a massage, a dry-cleaned suit, or the performance of a singer. The surplus value is produced in a similar manner whether it is a physical commodity or an apparently immaterial service. As long as the people who are paid wages by a private employer are producing the good a surplus value will be produced by the worker and will then be appropriated by the employer. If, something goes wrong and profits are not realized from the sale of the good, a competitor will either swallow the firm, or the company will simply go out of business.

So, one can readily see that according to this theory the fact and reality of exploitation is more or less *independent* of the level of wages or the quality of working conditions. A very highly paid and very skilled worker who works in excellent conditions of safety and security may well be producing much more surplus value, and hence be much more exploited, than a person on lousy wages who works in rotten and dangerous conditions. There is another problem and this is the theoretical distinction that some Marxists argue exists between "productive" and "unproductive" labour.

In this theory "productive" labour is labour that produces "surplus value". Labour that does not pro-

duce “surplus value” is said to be “unproductive labour”. Consequently, the work of nurses and porters in the National Health Service or in any other state-run service is not productive because it does not produce surplus value. This explains, the proponents of this theory would argue, why the private capitalists are always eager to keep the costs of these necessary, but unproductive activities as low as possible. Spending on activities, which do not produce surplus value, is only justified from the point of view of the capitalist if it can be demonstrated as essential for maintaining a social and economic environment that is favourable for making profits and generating surplus value. This is what capitalists mean when they say that we must concentrate on “wealth creation” rather than wasting money on bureaucracy or too many teachers or too much on other public expenditures.

So, the Marxist theory of exploitation also suggests that the work of women in the home as mothers and carers, of charity workers, and the many and varied activities of the unemployed or those who are simply not employed because of disability or age, is also unproductive because none of this enormous amount of labour – which probably exceeds in hours and energy that which is carried out in capitalist enterprises – produces surplus value. Therefore, the labour of the majority of the population is said to be unproductive; *consequently the majority of the population are not, strictly speaking, exploited at all.*

Marxist theorists and political activists overcome this difficulty by arguing that exploitation can only be thought of and calculated at the level of the whole economy; exploitation can only be understood as an expression of the class relations as a whole. Consequently, the exploitation of the worker in the capitalist enterprise is expressive of the exploitation of the entire working class, whether they are engaged in productive or in unproductive labour.

It is at this stage that the Marxist theory of exploitation begins to lose much of its precision because in the face of the actual presentation of class relations where great masses of working class people produce no surplus value at all, it becomes vital to

move the discussion onto a much more abstract level where it is necessary to talk about the working class “as a whole” being exploited rather than any particular individual, or any well-defined groups of individuals within the working class.

It should be remembered that this is not a recent problem. The tendency of Marxists in the past to concentrate their particular efforts upon the organization of male industrial workers was not because these workers were considered to be more productive of surplus value or more exploited. For Marxist and communist activists, for revolutionary socialists, the attraction of male industrial workers lay in their strategic importance in power generation, transport, and exports. Winning support among workers concentrated in these sectors would confer much greater strategic and tactical power and influence in any struggle with the capitalists and their state, than organization among more dispersed and diffuse sections of the working class.

So despite arguments to the contrary, the factories, the docks, the road transport fleets, the railways, the power stations, the steelworks, the coal mines, are of particular or special interest to these activists because workers in these sectors have always been able, through strike action, to bring the capitalist economy to a grinding halt, and in the right conditions, have always been able to provoke political crises which are regarded by agitators as providing great opportunities for the advance of communist or socialist politics and the development of a radical consciousness throughout society. Although some theorists try to argue that the ‘factory’ is important because it is *the* site of exploitation, *the* site of the production of surplus value,²¹ in reality the importance of manufacturing and heavy industry to the revolutionary is its strategic value for trade union and leftist militancy.

²¹ See, Joseph Choonara, ‘Marx or the Multitude?’ *International Socialism*, Issue 105, January 9, 2005.

Consequently, the difference between modern radical communist theorists like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and more traditional Marxist accounts of exploitation are not as great as some would argue.²² Whereas, Hardt and Negri argue that exploitation takes place at the level of the “metropolis” which is the site where the exploitation of the “multitude”²³ takes place, the traditionalist say that exploitation takes place at the level of the entire working class. Traditional Marxists have to say this, because when pushed to show how a nurse working for the NHS or a dustman or fire fighter working for the state or a local council is exploited they have to talk more abstractly about class relations, because according to the strict account produced by their theory these state employees are unproductive of surplus value and consequently, are not exploited at all, whereas a waged hairdresser, for example, is indeed exploited by the owner of the salon. This kind of emphasis would, of course, be politically unacceptable to all concerned, so it follows that they must, like Hardt and Negri, suggest that exploitation takes place at the level of the “multitude” or of “the working class”, whichever concept and term you prefer.

What emerges are a number of sharp differences between Hardt and Negri’s kind of account about what is needed to mobilize large numbers of people in struggle against capitalism, and the more traditionalist accounts concerning the working class. The differences are not, in truth, about exploitation. On the one side the traditionalists want to emphasise the need for a focus upon the organization of waged workers in their workplaces, on the other side, are those who follow the more contemporary or mainstream anti-capitalist position, who want to emphasise the need to focus, at the level of the entire community of working people who produce the common goods and common values, which are then, in a variety of different ways, appropriated by the capitalists through the processes of commodification and privatisation. So, the more

²² See Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

²³ See Footnote 19, p.29 above.

modern anti-capitalists think that exploitation takes place at the level of the community, known as the “multitude”, and attempt to work across the networks which compose the “metropolis” in order to subvert and undermine the capitalist system, while the traditional Marxists want to continue to talk in terms of class and of organizing working class resistance in order to overthrow capitalism.

We are still confronted by the problem of exploitation. Neither the traditional Marxist account, nor the more modern Hardt and Negri account of exploitation is satisfactory. We are still left with the problem of how to determine precisely who is it exactly that produces the growing wealth of capitalist society and who is it that appropriates it.

Clearly, if somebody comes along and simply takes something that you have made, in your own time, with your own resources, they are stealing from you, regardless of the legal explanations that might be deployed to justify the confiscation – it would be exploitation of a most direct kind. But this is not what happens in capitalist society, except when criminals steal from us.²⁴ A capitalist is somebody who mobilizes sufficient funds in order to be able to employ people (to pay them wages) to make things in anticipation of realising a profit once what has been made is sold. A thief, on the other hand, is a person who steals something that doesn’t belong to them. We may rhetorically call storeowners, bankers, and employers in general, “robbers” and “thieves”, but in truth we all know the difference between a criminal and a capitalist.²⁵

²⁴ Some people like to refer to national or local taxes as “daylight robbery”, but in truth taxes are paid in return for the protection, the social and industrial infrastructure, and the other services that the state provides, and in wealthy democratic capitalist states these imposts are the subject of considerable public debate and scrutiny. They are compulsory, but they are not in any sense, other than the rhetorical, “exploitative”.

²⁵ Of course, many capitalists are criminals in the sense that they routinely break or disregard the law, but this criminality is not intrinsic to their role as capitalists.

Of course, it is axiomatic for all anti-capitalists that it is the workers or the multitude, which produce the wealth, and the capitalists who appropriate it, but none of the available anti-capitalist accounts appear to be able to show beyond the level of generalities who is exploited, and by whom.

There is no doubt that many people simply believe that glaring social inequalities in relation to income and hours worked are sufficient evidence of exploitation; they do not need a complicated theory. The evidence of ‘their own eyes’ reveals the injustice at the heart of the capitalist system. However, these manifest inequalities exist throughout the entire population. We do not live in a society in which the plutocrats live at one end and everybody else lives at the other. Society is composed of a mass of different people living in a great spread of different circumstances and incomes. And, however you want to define the ‘working class’ or ‘the multitude’, there is no way that you can avoid the great variety of differing levels of wealth and power which exist *within* the working class, or *within* the multitude.

If we suggest that exploitation is simply revealed by inequality then we would be compelled to conclude that exploitative relations exist *between* poorer workers and better off ones; *between* supervisors and line-managers, and the people they manage; *between* workers living in rich countries and those living in poor countries; exploitation would indeed become so diffuse a concept that doesn’t seem to me that it would be a very useful idea at all.

However, this is precisely, the point of view of many of contemporary anti-capitalists who are transfixed by the horrifying levels of inequality in the world in which not much more than one and a half billion have acceptable standards of living while the remaining 4.8 billion live somewhere between perpetual want and actual starvation. This leads many contemporary anti-capitalists to conclude that we live so well *because* so many are starving; they believe that those of us in the rich countries are well off because we exploit the masses of people who live in the poor

countries, through the benefits we derive from cheap imported clothing, food, and other materials.

This extremely widespread point of view suggests that exploitation arises from the *prices* paid for consumption goods rather than within the manufacturing process itself. Consequently, many people believe that if we simply paid more for certain goods this could be translated into higher wages, and consequently, there would be less exploitation.

So, exploitation has been said to arise:

1. From the confiscation of surplus produce from the direct producer by feudal lords, slave owners, or by modern criminals;
2. From the extraction, by capitalists, of surplus value from waged workers;
3. From the extraction, by capitalists, of surplus value at the level of “capital in general” from “the working class in general”;
4. From the conversion of values produced by “the multitude” in “the common”, into the private property of the capitalists, by processes of commodification and privatisation;
5. From people who are simply better off or more powerful than others;

and finally,

6. From the people in richer countries who benefit from the cheap prices of goods produced in poorer countries.

From these options, taken together or individually, it will be seen how inadequate the various notions of exploitation available to revolutionary socialists and anti-capitalists actually are. Evidently, we have not yet produced a robust or general theory of exploitation. Consequently, we cannot identify the exploiters and

the exploitative relations with the degree of clarity that would be needed for the elaboration of a general solution to the problem, or persuasive enough to win the support of an overwhelming body of public opinion. This is why, I suspect, that it is “justice” and fighting “injustice” *not* “exploitation” that motivates most anti-capitalist campaigns and arguments. It is the tangle of relationships between ideas of justice and injustice, between equality and inequality, which dominate the movement rather than Marxist ideas of class, multitude, or exploitation.

Capitalism and its tendencies

Karl Marx certainly believed that capitalism by creating the working class, by concentrating it together in great cities, and by vastly increasing the size of business enterprises, through centralization and the concentration of capital in fewer and fewer hands, was engaged, *ipso facto*, in the socialization of the means of production.²⁶ We can certainly see today that many great enterprises are owned by large investment vehicles – by insurance companies, banks, and trusts, or by wealthy individuals – *rentiers* who have little conception or knowledge of what they actually own. Production is socialized and ownership of capital, while remaining private, has become an increasingly abstract concept.

Now, none of this has resulted in a tendency towards socialism – i.e. towards a situation in which socialized means of production are brought into alignment with socialized forms of ownership. Private ownership of capital has proved powerfully resistant. Neither ‘managerial revolutions’, nor the tendency of business executives to blithely ignore rebellious or truculent shareholders, has resulted in a spontaneous move towards the abolition of the private ownership of capital. Similarly, the working class has nowhere on earth made any sustained move towards the abolition of economies dominated by private capital.²⁷

²⁶ *Communist Manifesto*, §I, pp.34-50.

²⁷ The revolutions in China (1921-1950) and Cuba (1953-1959) were not movements by the working class against capitalism. Although on the

These might indeed, as Marx thought, be immanent tendencies within the trajectory of capitalist development, but they are certainly not likely to be realized in a spontaneous manner, either incrementally, or as a consequence of innovation and reform ratified by the powers that be.

Yet, somehow, commercial society – or capitalism – the form of society in which the motive of most, if not all production, is the self-expansion of capital, a society in which goods and services are primarily produced for exchange, with the express purpose of realizing the surplus value created during their manufacture, has survived. Capitalism has survived the creation of megacities; it has survived the emergence of a global working class numbered in billions; it has survived wars of unmatched destruction; it has survived ecological catastrophes, revolutions, deep economic slumps, and existential financial crises. It has barreled along through all this apparent chaos provoking relentless technical innovation and a seemingly unending process of social transformation in which the lives, values, and outlook, of the mass of the population are subject to an unparalleled state of flux

In fully developed capitalist societies, in less than a single lifetime, the social and legal status of women, black people, those with physical or mental disabilities, and homosexuals, has changed out of all recognition. Attitudes to sexuality have become more open and considerably more relaxed. People have become less tolerant of high-handed attitudes; deference in one area of life after another has declined; teachers no longer beat their students, parents who routinely hit their children are reduced to a small minority. Religious observance has declined and where it persists, it has become multifarious, marked by significant splits between traditionalists, and those who wish to introduce tolerance and acceptance of difference into their meeting houses, temples, churches, synagogues, and even into some of their mosques.

All these changes have cut with the grain – once it has been demonstrated in practice, or by determined struggle and argument, that capitalism can accommodate such reforms, or even benefit from them, resistance has fallen

conquest of state power, in 1949 and 1959 respectively, the Cuban and Chinese leaderships moved towards the abolition of private capital, these were not the acts of the working class, but of party-state structures, imposed upon peasants and workers in both town and country.

away, legislation has been commissioned, and new rights, practices, and freedoms, have been ratified. Deep problems remain – neither the state nor private capital appears to be able to provide affordable childcare, reform the prisons, or guarantee decent education or housing for all. Mobility, and a good living for most disabled people appear to lie some way beyond the capacity of private enterprise or of the public authorities. These failures impact disproportionately upon women – undermining other gains and limiting the realization of equality for many historically abused or oppressed sections of our communities.

Consequently, it has become clear that if it can be demonstrated that change is either neutral or positively beneficial to the process of capital accumulation then it will in the fullness of time be embraced by the powers that be. Alternatively, if the cost of change to investors or tax revenues, is in any way significant, resistance to change and innovation among the propertied will be steadfast, regardless of the degree to which this impacts upon other gains. This is why workingwomen have such difficulty accessing childcare, why disabled people are routinely excluded from one area of life after another, and why many poor people cannot get insurance, proper housing, pensions, or gain equal access to education and healthcare.

These difficulties provide socialists with an extremely fertile ground for protesting against the ills of capitalism, while simultaneously allowing them to adopt a somewhat contradictory or even oblique approach to the improvements and gains that have actually been made. Socialists find it easy to pooh, pooh, the importance of some reforms, while attributing those they regard as inescapably valuable to their own actions and campaigning. Radical people enjoy claiming the credit for themselves, or for ‘the movement’, or for ‘the working class’, for women’s suffrage, for the emancipation of black people, for the equality for homosexuals. They rarely ponder for a moment on the impossibility that any of these changes, could have simply been brought about by radical protest. Significant changes in the society at all levels, changes in technology and in the organization of the labour process all have had a significant role to play. *Indeed the reformation and recreation of the working class itself has been as important, indeed probably more important, an element in the emancipation of women,*

homosexuals, and many others, than the efforts of protest groups. To be sure, sustained campaigns and protests have opened up vital public discourse and argument – they have repeatedly put change upon the agenda – but they, like the changes themselves, have been produced by fundamental shifts in the needs and possibilities of capital and the manner in which capitalist society finds itself in a constant state of flux. This is a state of turmoil triggered by incessant and almost regular technical innovation for well over three centuries,²⁸ which has brought in its train perpetual changes and upheaval in the way in which people earn wages and make their living.

Despite the remarkable evidence of unceasing technical invention, and associated improvements in medicine, life expectancy, material welfare, and the capacity of the system to absorb broadly progressive change in cautious moves, step-by-step, towards the rule of law, the exercise of democratic rights, civil and legal equality, since at least the 1830s, socialists routinely declare the system to be dead, incapable of further development – a sort of zombie system, no less. The more theoretically minded often used to refer to it as “late capitalism” as if they knew something that’d been hidden from the rest of us.²⁹ In any event socialists of all stripes have in one way or another been given to declaring that “The End Is Nigh” since at least 1914 and certainly since 1929. There will come a day, inevitably, when those who think like this will be right, but one has to doubt the utility of such a prognosis. Not least because the future to which they refer appears to recede like a mirage in the desert as we move towards it.

²⁸ This is a well-known observation made by Karl Marx in the Communist Manifesto and elsewhere. See particularly Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution: A History of Capitalism*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010. See also Jan de Vries and Ad Van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

²⁹ First used by Werner Sombart at the beginning of the twentieth century the phrase “late-capitalism” came to prominence on the left during the seventies to describe the emerging processes of global industrialization, mass consumption, and the increasing importance of purely financial transactions as a source of profit. See Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, 1972, London: Verso, 1978.

So socialists have had difficulty for some considerable time acknowledging the progressive character of capitalism. Many accept that once upon a time the system was capable of introducing positive gains for humanity, but now it is often said to be incapable of improving things, and has been so for some considerable time. Indeed, the positive aspects of capitalism are said by many to have been exhausted during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Of course, many socialists faced with the slaughter of Native Americans, with the horrors of the Middle Passage, with Cromwell's massacres in Ireland, the enclosures and clearances, or the system of transportation in chains of thieves, miscreants, trade unionists, and Fenian rebels to Australia, have always found it difficult to accept that capitalism ever represented much of an advance on what went before.³⁰

Despite many disagreements and nuances in the socialist outlook there is common agreement that imperialism represents a decisive shift away from anything positive about capitalism. Imperialism is said to represent the decay of the system as it responded to the difficulty of making profits by processes of monopolization,³¹ cartelization, and by expanding globally, either through the direct military conquest of colonies, or by more subtle means, through large-scale investment in new markets and dependent territories. It is thought that as capitalists in mature or fully developed commercial economies experienced the problems associated with the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, they prevailed upon governments to help them conquer territories where labour and raw materials could be had at a fraction of the price – and new places could be found for enormous amounts of capital seeking a more profitable home.³²

³⁰ See the discussion of the rejection of the progressive character of capitalism in the context of an evaluation of *The Country and the City* in Chapter Eight of Don Milligan, *Raymond Williams: Hope and Defeat in the Struggle for Socialism*, Studies in Anti-Capitalism, 2007, pp.242-251.

³¹ The process whereby enterprises grow larger and large as they swallow up the market share of competitors, and the businesses and companies of competitors, is often seen as a negative rather than a dynamic response to challenges presented by the difficulty of maintaining profitability simply by squeezing the life out of the competition.

³² See particularly, J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: a study*, 1902, London: Unwin Hyman, 1988; V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism: a popular outline*, 1917, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970. See also, David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, 2003, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Added to this historical dimension is the fact that many modern capitalist enterprises cannot, during times of recession and crisis, make profits at all in their core businesses. They retreat from the field of innovation and competition, and begin to rely largely upon their capacity to play the stock market, buying and selling shares and other securities with their company's cash hoard, and in turn banking big profits on these purely financial transactions rather than making money through manufacturing or by providing the goods and services, which these enterprises were originally established to do. As a consequence big companies and corporations have scaled back their involvement in research and development, closing down their own laboratories, and relying increasingly upon governments to fund 'blue sky' thinking; now it is the state that largely absorbs the costs of bringing new materials and new technologies to the point at which they can be handed over to capitalists for profitable exploitation. Even where this appears not to be the case, as in pharmaceuticals, large purchases of medicine by government agencies, international bodies, and big charities, at inflated prices funnels money directly from the public purse into 'big pharma' for the development of new drugs and treatments.³³

Yet, despite the truth of much of this, capitalism has witnessed, and continues to witness, the most astonishing improvements in the creation of new materials, new technologies, methods of working, and new ways of organizing the labour process. Socialist claims that the system is bankrupt, or that its potential is exhausted, sit uneasily with the wholesale expansion of new points of production and new investments in infrastructure and manufacturing capacity in almost every corner of the world.

Globalization has transformed the nature of imperialism by bringing into existence the world market in goods, and even in labour, to a density and a degree unimagined by earlier generations. Marx in a number of places makes wonderfully prescient comments about the way in which capitalism bestrode the world in the middle of the nineteenth century, but even he would have been astonished in the way

³³ Ben Goldacre, *Bad Pharma: How drug companies mislead doctors and harm patients*, London: Fourth Estate, 2012. See particularly the discussion of marketing, pp.240-340.

that containerization, for example, has reduced the cost of the transport of goods to almost anywhere in the world.³⁴

Capitalism has without doubt gone global and this has irretrievably altered the social composition and balance of labouring populations in one society after another. In region after region the employers and the state institutions upon which they rely, are being confronted by the need to work out ways of incorporating new workers into society as citizens – this is because democracy, as was discovered long ago by mature capitalist societies, is really the only way of achieving stability. Once wage labour and urbanization reaches a certain mass, the incorporation of working class people into bourgeois relations *as citizens*, ‘with a stake in society’, becomes imperative.

Not without cause, revolutionary socialists view this process of democratization and the promotion of ‘human rights’ with considerable suspicion. However, a more nuanced and articulate engagement with it is vitally necessary, because democracy, yes even bourgeois democracy, and the rule of law, are highly prized by working people throughout the world. It remains a moot point whether India or China or Brazil can succeed in deepening the attachment of their masses to their societies by the extension of meaningful citizenship to workers, but there is no doubt, that it is in the interest of working people everywhere that they do. Free trade unions, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and organization, freedom of religion, are the watchwords of the progressive bourgeoisie when confronted by emergent cities crowded with tens of millions of workers. This is not something we should disparage – these are objectives, which we should wholeheartedly endorse, by demanding their extension and consolidation.

By the same token the revolutionary left cannot express support for these democratic objectives if its default position is automatically to support religious, nationalist, tribal or patriarchal insurgencies against ‘imperialism’ whenever or wherever they arise in the world. These absurd expressions of solidarity in which socialists line-up with armed elements and movements who explicitly oppose civil freedoms and

³⁴ Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping, Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, *passim*.

social equality, has led many on the revolutionary left into bizarre alliances with political and social movements, and with insurgencies, which are the sworn enemies of bourgeois democracy and everything it stands for.

Clearly the international bourgeoisie's need and desire for order has endlessly contradictory and often very bloody consequences, which is why revolutionary socialists should be more circumspect and certainly much tougher and more principled in the manner in which it demonstrates its commitment the rights and interests of working people throughout the world.

Hundreds of millions of peasants or marginalized labourers have over the last thirty years been transformed into waged workers in construction, manufacturing, transport, services, and food processing. In the process many millions have been raised out of absolute poverty as they and their kids have crammed themselves into municipal concrete warrens and dizzying tower blocks, rickety favelas, and the fetid slums of burgeoning megacities across the world.³⁵

The manifest inability of the system to solve the housing crisis,³⁶ or to feed, clothe, and educate, everybody adequately is, of course, a legitimate focus for socialist agitation, and it provides considerable ammunition for those who would argue that capitalism is actually approaching its nadir, if not its actual disintegration. This explains why socialists embrace every catastrophe from war to climate change as evidence of the decadence of the system. Capitalism it is said is exhausted and must be overthrown and replaced by socialist planning which focuses upon human needs rather than private or corporate profits. We are faced with a new age of 'barbarism' as capitalist greed helter-skelters the world downwards, spiraling us all ever

³⁵ "Indeed, neoliberal capitalism, since 1970 has multiplied Dickens's notorious slum of Tom-all-Alone's in *Bleak House* by exponential powers. Residents of slums, while only 6 percent of the city population of the developed countries, constitute a staggering 78.2 percent of urbanites in the least-developed countries; this equals fully a third of the global urban population." Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 2006, London: Verso, 2007, p.23.

³⁶ Friedrich Engels insisted in three newspaper articles in *Leipzig Volksstaat* published during 1872 that the housing crisis could not be solved within capitalist relations of production. Anyone looking at the housing crisis today can clearly see the abiding truth of this observation. See Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954.

deeper towards war and ecological disaster. This is what makes socialism such an urgent question; it is all that stands between us and a new dark age – or even no age at all.³⁷

In recent years this has led many on the left to endorse what might be called a ‘new Malthusian trap,’³⁸ in which petroleum, copper, and much else, will run out, and the growth of world population from six billion to nine billion by 2060 or thereabouts will spell the end of the road for humanity, or at least the end of civilized life. The fact that capitalist enterprises and the states that endorse more or less unfettered commercial development, show no sign of running out of ideas about the creation of new materials and new methods of obtaining old ones, ingenious new ways of generating energy, of controlling and stemming industrial pollution, cuts little or no ice with most socialists, because they are committed to seeing capitalism is a system destined for catastrophic failure and implosion. In any event they argue, the drive for private profit will always frustrate and wreck any attempts to deal with the adverse effects of climate change and population growth.

This posture belongs to a long socialist tradition, in which the collapse or disintegration of economic and social life is thought to hold out the prospect of conditions favourable for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. By and large, radicals anticipate social advance through crisis and dislocation. These are the only circumstances in which revolutionaries conceive of capitalism being replaced by regimes committed to genuine human solidarity. They see the growth of mass discontent and the radical politicization of millions of working people, prompted by slumps and wars, as fertile ground for anti-capitalist propaganda, and for mass movements among the dispossessed clamouring for revolutionary change.

Given our concrete historical experience over the last two centuries, this is perhaps the oddest aspect of the revolu-

³⁷ Engels is reported as saying, “Capitalist society faces a dilemma, either an advance to socialism or a reversion to barbarism.” Cited by Rosa Luxemburg, in *The Junius Pamphlet*, (written in Prison in 1915, first distributed clandestinely in 1916), London: Merlin Press, (no date), circa 1970, p.16.

³⁸ The ‘neo-Malthusian’ crisis to which I refer here is to be found the widespread view that it is impossible to overcome finite limits to growth imposed by the natural limitations of the planet. As Malthus famously put it, “The power of population is infinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man.” Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.13.

tionary socialist tradition. It would be understandable if systemic crises had, at some time in the past, created conditions broadly favourable for social advance, but the dismal truth is, they never have. Economic dislocation certainly does rouse millions to action, and does lead millions to radical ideas. Unfortunately, this has invariably created circumstances in which more conservative or radical rightwing agendas have gained ground as socialists have found themselves fighting losing battles, tooth and nail, with various parties of order, more than willing to scapegoat minorities and smash the left, in the service of God, Family, and the Nation. This kind of reaction has assumed extremely varied forms from monarchism, Nazism, Iron Guardism, fascism, falangism, and military or 'popular' dictatorships, framed by Roman Catholicism, or Islam, or even Shintoism. There have, of course, been left wing manifestations of various kinds of nationalist regeneration, but none of them has ever resulted in the democratic socialist management of economic and social life.³⁹

There is no doubt that capitalism is subject to booms and slumps and even to existential crises which threaten its very existence. So far, however, these crises have only *tended* towards collapse – commercial society has survived them all. This is because the big capitalists and the state institutions that they endorse have developed ways in which to ameliorate the effects of monopolization, corruption, crime, and the failure of markets. Whether by the efforts of big bankers, of individual states, or the international coordination of government intervention, the capitalist class has always ensured that the ship has been steadied and made ready for further advance. This always involves big attacks upon working class living standards and a suite of interventions into the life of the labour movement, ranging from direct state sponsorship of trade unionism to the confinement of working class organizations by statute, or to the wholesale suppression of the labour movement, up to, and including, the imprisonment and assassination of its leaders and organizers.

³⁹ The leading examples of Stalinist regimes committed to nationalist regeneration are People's Republic of China (1949); Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1945 unification: 1976); Democratic People's Republic of Korea (1948); Republic of Cuba (1959).

The intrinsic threats to the existence of capitalism, the rising organic composition of capital and the *tendency* of the rate of profit to fall, together with the growth of the working class, have been met on the one hand, with technical invention and innovation, with the expansion of production, and on the other, with the incorporation of the working class into civil and economic arrangements by the extension of democratic rights, the expansion of property ownership, savings and investment, and the emergence of mass consumption. The tendencies towards the dislocation and final collapse of capitalism, to which learned Marxists refer, are just that, *tendencies*. They are tendencies always answered by dynamic *countervailing tendencies*, which appear to be no less inherent tendencies or properties of system than those, which point to its ruin.

Revolutionary Reforms

The tensile strength of capitalism resides in its nature as a real social system. It is not an ‘economy’, it is a way of life, an entirely coherent cultural formation. It is not a political conspiracy, or the ‘put up job’ of a privileged elite. Of course, there are privileged elites and there are conspiracies, but capitalism – the social system organized around realizing private profits from production geared more or less entirely around making goods and services for exchange – is not one of them. Indeed, great efforts have been made to ensure that the propertied and the property-less are able to get along as harmoniously as possible in conditions of gross inequality. Christian thinkers, politicians, industrialists, novelists, journalists, and reformers, have over the last three centuries, relentlessly sought ever more effective ways of cohering the working people around the assumptions, values, and virtues of the kind of civilization which flows from the private ownership of capital, from continuous technical innovation, and unceasing commercial activity. However, not all of these effects are contrived or induced, many of them are the spontaneous results of changes in the production process itself.

One of the most recent peculiarities of technical innovation are the way in which even very large employers hire people to work in relatively small groups and teams. There are, of course workplaces where labour discipline is imposed in very traditional ways with use of the latest technologies, as with the staff of call centres, or of order pickers and packers in warehouses, or hydroponic growing sheds. In these environments supervision can be both hi-tech and as ruthless as any old-time regime imposed by foremen, typing pool supervisors, or chief clerks. Yet for the most part the large rooms in mills, factories and offices, occupied by people of a single race, and a single gender, which lived in a single neighbourhood, all kept in line by close supervision, have disappeared. This is because there are many branches of administration, manufacturing, and services where people are hired to work in teams characterized by a more cooperative ethos in which the worker is expected to be fully engaged with the job in hand, and does indeed work with some enthusiasm and interest in the successful outcome of the project whatever it is.

To be sure the surveillance of workers, made possible in the past by open-plan shopfloors, warehouses, and offices, has been replaced by an electronic panopticon.⁴⁰ This is because this kind of supervision remains suitable for tasks involving simple repetitive manual activity or oral input by staff. However, when any degree of creative engagement, or the deployment of a range of more subtle social skills is called for, then workers in small task oriented teams are required increasingly to motivate or ‘supervise’ themselves as the assessment of performance is largely historical – with a focus on past performance – rather than the output of a single shift or of a single day or week. Such

⁴⁰ Panopticon: All round surveillance was pioneered in the prison design of open radiating galleries that can easily be observed from a central point suggested in the ‘panopticon’ of the utilitarian thinker Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). This sort of arrangement was also considered for workshop design. See also, Simon Reilly, *The use of Electronic Surveillance and Performance Measures in the Workplace: A Qualitative Investigation*, Durham: Durham Business School, University of Durham, 2010; and an interesting article on office work, George Musser, ‘The Origin of Cubicles and the Open Plan Office’, *Scientific American*, August 17, 2009.

workers are expected to be ‘self-starters’ and to ‘own’ their jobs.

This kind of (H)uman (R)esources ideology has more substance when it is realized that modern working people, unlike many workers in the past, are expected to work in radically heterogeneous small groups alongside people with different cultures, religions, sexualities, outlooks and aspirations. Most modern workers are required to overcome personal difficulties and differences, and to develop strategies and the capacity to avoid conflict and remove obstacles, which may undermine the performance of the job in hand. So-called ‘soft’ skills are much in demand as we witness the growth of a working class which is immeasurably more ‘skilled in general’ than their predecessors, who were, by and large, much more ‘skilled in detail’.

This has produced great swathes of working class people who appear to be much more ‘petit bourgeois’ than they might have seemed in the past. Their immediate response to problems is less likely to be collective and much more likely to be individualistic. Even where trade union organization is involved this can often result in the trade union representative operating like a counselor or adviser to somebody engaged in an individual dispute with a manager or supervisor rather than in any kind of collective action.

Paradoxically, although lacking the collectivism of the past, such workers are active and often more collegiate and more articulate in their relationships with colleagues in the workplace. This is because the labour process demands greater levels of discrete and active cooperation, than was probably the case with the close supervision and homogeneous work regimes of the past. By and large these workers do not join trade unions and do not appear to be attracted to older styles of labour movement activity.

Yet, it would be foolish for revolutionary socialists to imagine that any real change in society can be brought about without them. Or, that the only condition of engagement with them is their recruitment into the existing kinds of trade union activity or movement. This private sector world is a foreign territory to most

radicals, because revolutionary socialists, insofar as they have any organized presence within the workplace at all, are concentrated in public sector services and administration, in rail transport, and in airports.⁴¹ For the most part private sector employment, apart from the precarious office, retail, and bar work of student comrades, is out of bounds for most active socialists. In other words the mass of the working class lays some way beyond the reach of our politics, and of our current experience.

In 2011 out of a total UK workforce of around 28 millions 5.9 million people worked in the public sector, the rest of the working population, around 22.1 million people worked in the private sector. Interestingly most private sector workers in the UK (99.3 per cent) work for firms with fewer than 49 employees, and most of these firms are considerably smaller. This means that the overwhelming majority of the working class works in small units of employment for small and very small employers.⁴²

It means that by and large, the relations between the workers and their employers, are relationships between people who know each other personally, and in a significant number of cases, must have day-to-day contact with each other, because the small employer will be directly engaged in the conduct of the day's work, and in the management of the firm. In circumstances like these it is probably unwise to imagine that rhetoric and arguments about the 1% who own everything and the 99% who have nothing, will cut much ice. Anymore than arguments that lines up the working class as a phalanx on one side of society, ranged against the capitalist hoard on the other, is likely to make much sense either to the worker or to her employer. The two sides of this relationship live within the same society, and are not in any sense hermetically

⁴¹ In 2011 UK trade union membership was concentrated in the public sector. 56 percent of public service workers are members of trade unions. In the private sector only 14.1 percent of the employees join unions. This means that more than half of trade union membership is concentrated in public services, which accounts for a little over a fifth of the workforce. Nikki Brownlie, *Trade Union Membership 2011*, London: Department for Innovation Business and Skills.

⁴² See Footnote 17, p.28 *above*.

sealed off from each other by the fact that one person has large enough assets, and sufficient collateral to borrow the money, to pay wages to the other person. Whatever one thinks about relationships of this sort, the notion of “irreconcilable class conflict” doesn’t quite cover it.

Yet capitalism does remain a problem. The private ownership of the productive property of society – “capital” – lies at the heart of our difficulties. Although there is not an automatic relationship between being property-less and the pursuit of some supposed set of ‘working class interests’, it remains entirely true that the broad division of society between those with capital, and those without, remains at the heart of what are often called the “contradictions of capitalism”. Contradictions that can, perhaps, be best understood, as the structural inability of corporate and private investors to align their need for dividends, with the material conditions of the property-less, in any reliable or consistent manner.

Things cannot be *hunky dory* between workers and private employers because the private ownership of capital, the private ownership of firms concentrate all strategic decisions in the hands of the owners of the enterprises. The workers have no rights whatsoever to determine what should be made or produced, no right to determine how the firm should be run. This remains entirely in the gift of the capitalist who makes all decisions regarding prices, quality, and investment. He or she may ask for advice from their employees, but they are not bound to accept any suggestions or ideas from their workers.

So within a relationship framed by the contract of employment the capitalist enterprise is a dictatorship in which the worker has no rights whatsoever to determine the nature, purpose, or future activities to which their energies and their initiative is applied. Whatever they produce be it a service or a good belongs to the employer. No matter if they work there for three months or thirty years, no matter whether they simply mop the floors or design complex software, they will,

unless they invest capital in the firm, never own or control any part of the business.

Now this is evidently a problem in a kind of economy where more and more activities require or demand the active engagement of the personality and interest of the worker. It is difficult to urge the worker to take 'ownership' of their job, or of the task in hand, if they do not have any vested interest in a successful outcome. Employers often attempt to get around this by the introduction of bonuses and of various kinds of performance related pay – but these are limited devices and not immensely efficient in ensuring that the worker remains engaged with the overall success of the enterprise rather than the specific activity assessed and measured for the payment of the bonus.

Clearly the revolutionary reform, for which we should call, is for the termination of private ownership, and its replacement with cooperative ownership by everyone that works for the firm. This immediately raises legal problems about the dispossession of the private owner, either in the form of a worker buyout or in some kind of progressive process in which the workers' cooperative would over a period of time pay compensation to the former employer for their loss of the capital value of the firm.

There is no reason at all why this should necessarily or in every case assume an antagonistic form. There may well be many circumstances where private owners or the government might be willing to embark on a process of cooperation or mutualization in which enterprises are gradually taken over by their workers. Certainly, when it comes to larger enterprises that find themselves in difficulties, as was the case with Northern Rock, revolutionaries should raise the demand for an immediate transfer of ownership to a workers' cooperative or some kind of mutualized enterprise.

Whenever the opportunity arises we should raise the question of workers control directly within the context of existing capitalist relations. Not because this will whittle away capitalism, or because it will solve the overarching problems of economic calculation presented by capitalism, but because it will strengthen the

capacity and training of working people to run their own affairs and develop concrete experience of the democratic management of manufacturing and service provision. It will help to make one of the key elements of socialism, workers self-management of trading enterprises, less abstract and less remote.

Striving for an increasingly cooperative type of economy, raising the demand for cooperation or mutualization, at every available opportunity, would put the question of socialism and workers' self-management on the agenda, widening the discussion of concrete alternatives to capitalism, drawing in workers, economists, planners, and other intellectuals, into a wide ranging consideration of the concrete problems which faces the realization of the socialist revolution.

Not the least of these would be the way we could raise the question of the problem of economic calculation. In capitalist society this is left to the market and the competitive determination of prices, which helps individual capitalists to know what kinds of goods or service are likely to sell in what sort of quantity and at what level of quality. It is often argued that this market mechanism cannot be replaced.⁴³ It is argued that without the price mechanism it would not be possible to know what to produce – that economists and planners could never properly gather or process sufficient information in a timely manner about the demand and the potential availability of various goods and services that should be produced and where they should be conveyed. Furthermore, in a situation in which billions of dollars worth of bonds, shares, and options, flow electronically around the world, hour by hour and minute by minute, it is easy to become bedazzled by the inherent difficulty in understanding the movement of prices and what they're actually telling us.⁴⁴ Quite apart from determining what to do about the numerous institutions and the millions of individual investors or *rentiers* who depend upon

⁴³ Ludwig Von Mises, *Socialism: an economic and sociological analysis*, 1922, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981, *passim*.

⁴⁴ This is immensely complicated. See for example, David Harvey, *Limits to Capital*, 1982/1999, London: Verso, 2006, pp.202-329.

percentages derived from the movement of these prices for their incomes or pensions.

It might well be that advances in big data analytics are a game changer in this regard. At the moment these sorts of techniques and technologies are more likely to be used by logistics companies, advertisers and police and anti-fraud agencies, but revolutionary socialists might find a much more productive use for these ideas in new forms of economic planning.

The key problem of capitalist society is the way in which most economic activity rests upon the need that private investors have to make profits, and the way in which this need to make profits, is not in any necessary or vital way anchored to the needs of society. One only has to think of the global housing crisis, which is felt in one way or another, in every country on the planet, to see how the price mechanism, and the market fails to provide billions of people with what they actually need. This is repeated, most notably, in relation to education, healthcare, and social insurance. By creating a system, which favours perpetual innovation, capitalism has vastly increased the productivity of human labour and increased the aggregate wealth of our societies to an unparalleled extent. However, people become socialists because capitalism outrages our sense of justice by the way in which the operation of the system compounds the gross inequalities in the world, and actually prevents a more equitable and sustainable enjoyment of this increased wealth.

The revolutionary socialist project is about working out how to create circumstances in which economic life can become democratic by enabling working people to both own and control the enterprises in which they work, and develop genuinely popular means of regulating economic life both within individual countries, and across entire regions of the globe. The objective is to work out a means of retaining the capacity for innovation and development, initiated by capitalism, which is vital if we are going to be able to cope with the challenges of population growth, environmental degradation, and climate change. And, do

this in such a way, that we harness the accumulation of wealth made possible by improvements in the productivity of labour and the creation of new materials and new forms of energy, to ensure the widest and most equitable enjoyment of these benefits throughout the world,

This is a tall order, to say the least. And, it cannot be staged like an Eisenstein movie. It is not going to be achieved by *Storming the Winter Palace* or by over-throwing the state in a heroic charge at the capitalist class as if they were a police cordon kettling society. We need to take command of the arguments about the future of our society. We need to be able to determine the parameters of debate. We need to be able to win elections and win over large sections of the middle class and the petit bourgeoisie to our side. We need to create a revolutionary socialist culture in which millions of people are drawn into cooperative enterprises, and take the idea and the objective of the popular democratic management of economic life to heart.

It means bringing an end to the kind of revolutionary socialism that refuses engagement with bourgeois society and bourgeois politics. It means striving to go beyond the necessary, but essentially defensive struggles against attacks upon wages, conditions, and welfare rights.

People have got to know what we're on about. We need to enter the political fray on every question of the day, raising concrete demands measured, calibrated, and calculated to increase social solidarity, reduce the divisions and conflict between the mass of the people, and engage directly in the struggle to extend democracy and civil rights from the sphere of politics to the sphere of material relations and economic life. It means ditching the old counter position: 'reform or revolution' and replacing it with the truth that *there will be no revolution without reforms*.

The only questions we should demand of any proposed reform is in what way, if it could be won, would it:

1. Contribute to the deepening or widening of the sphere of democracy

And,

2. In what way will it help to strengthen social solidarity

Citizen Wolfie Smith

There is no doubt at all that most sophisticated and well educated members of the working class, of the middle class, and of the petit bourgeoisie of independent tradesmen, and small business people, would regard the preoccupations of contemporary revolutionary socialists as absurd, and if not literally barmy, then completely unfathomable. They would be mystified by our interest in Lenin or Zinoviev and fail to see any contemporary relevance in a great many of our concerns.

Citizen Wolfie Smith of the Tooting Popular Front or the struggles between revolutionary groups famously depicted in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* as the battle between The People's Front of Judea, the Judean People's Front, the Judean Popular People's Front, the Campaign for a Free Galilee and the Popular Front of Judea, continue to have purchase because they are hilarious references to the multiplicity of insignificant revolutionary groups gripped by a sense of their own importance, which condemns them to a life of infighting and irrelevance on the margins of society.

As far as wider society is concerned we are either semi-criminal incompetent layabouts, mad pedants given to scrapping over matters far too arcane to interest anybody but ourselves, or unworldly idealists given to dwelling upon entirely impractical dreams – nice, but essentially nutty. The awful truth is that all of these caricatures get close to the bone and mercilessly send us up. Indeed, that's why they are generally hilarious, particularly the Python sketch – I must

say I've never been able to trust comrades who don't get the joke!

Such comrades persist in seeing some relevance in discussing the role of Lenin, his democratic phases, his flexibility, his excessive centralism, as against his hatred of bureaucracy, Lenin in all his contradictory tactical and strategic complexity, his party building techniques, and the significance of the Bolshevik seizure of power, as if this bloody disaster, the October Revolution, has anything other than negative lessons for working class people throughout the world. It is astonishing that such comrades never question Lenin's lack of prescience regarding the likely response of Tsarist generals, the Imperial German High Command, the Polish gentry, the Czechs Legions, Imperial Japan, and the British War Office, to a Bolshevik seizure of power. Apparently, Lenin, the author of the *Development of Capitalism in Russia*,⁴⁵ did not anticipate the response of the peasantry to the closure of markets and the suppression of private trade.

His rule by decree, his suppression of all other liberal and revolutionary parties and groups, his endorsement of 'anti-terrorist' trials of anarchists, and of subsequent executions, his founding of a secret police agency with plenipotentiary powers – a law unto itself – his foundation of the Gulag – all these appalling responses of V. I. Lenin – to the Russian Revolution and Civil War are to be thought of as mere contingencies, forced upon a brilliant revolutionary, who took Marxism by the scruff of the neck and hauled into the real politics of the twentieth century.⁴⁶ Interestingly, when the Civil War was won and the counter revolutionaries were defeated Lenin gave not the slightest impression of relaxing Bolshevik terror. On the contrary victory resulted in the extension of dictatorship to the Bolshevik Party itself.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ V. I. Lenin, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia: The process of the formation of a home market for large-scale industry*, 1899, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964

⁴⁶ See my discussion of *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth*, edited by Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek, editors Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, at 'Socialist Strategy' online at Studies in Anti-Capitalism.

⁴⁷ The Tenth Congress of the Bolshevik Party, held March 8-16, 1921, temporarily lifted the ban on small private businesses and reopened markets for a wide range of products, also banned factions, free discussion, and the expression of all internal dissent among party members.

Comrades who like to discuss the relevance of Lenin and enter into elaborate apologetics for the man and his party, before going on to talk about the need for democracy in contemporary revolutionary socialist organizations, should think seriously about the inherent contradictions in their arguments if they don't want to give people the idea that "if push comes to shove" and the "stick needs bending" that they too will endorse rule by decree, plenipotentiary powers for the secret police, red terror, and the suppression of all contrary opinions "in the defence of democracy".

The truth is, of course, that the mass of workers have never endorsed this kind of tyranny and have always fought shy of endorsing any political parties that do. This is because the working class values the bourgeois 'rule of law', and the flawed and limited democracy, that are among the most striking political and social achievements of wealthy well-established capitalist states. The mass of working people are simply not going to fall in with revolutionary socialists who offer them anything less than an *extension or deepening of democracy*, and no arguments about contingency or the need for dictatorship in the context of revolutionary crises are going to cut any ice with them. This is because most working people are in historical terms, 'street wise', they know that once rights are taken away or suppressed they are unlikely to come back, because those who have taken them, be they commissars or members of a politbureau, will always find it convenient to rule without interference from below.

Conclusion

The basic argument of this pamphlet is that in order to have any chance of success revolutionary socialists need to fight to enter the mainstream of society's discussions by taking politics and political life in the here-and-now seriously. It means being prepared to engage directly with the problems of the day – ensuring that the policies we adopt and the reforms that we fight to get implemented are always those that tend towards strengthening both democracy and social solidarity. It means fighting and winning elections. It means working to move beyond necessary protests in defence of wages, conditions, and wel-

fare, in order to raise demands for the popular management of trading enterprises, demands that will initiate wide public discussion of the practical problems and obstacles that stand in the way of democratic economic planning.

Above all it means rejecting Bolshevism in all its forms, in favour of preparing our society to take the revolutionary step of eclipsing the capitalist class, their intelligentsia, their experts, their state, *as a precondition*, for a direct struggle in which popular democratic institutions founded and run by working people would take power.

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