

## What's Wrong with *Spiked Online*? Liberty and low expectations

By Don Milligan

The answer to the question, what's wrong with *Spiked*, might be, not very much. It's a well-designed and well-written online current affairs magazine. It's "a fan of reason, liberty, progress, economic growth, choice, conviction and thought experiments about the future, and not so big on eco-miserabilism, identikit politicians, nostalgia, dumbing down and determinism." So far, so good. The magazine enthusiastically supports freedom of speech; it supports the development of debating skills in schools and promotes critical argument with the received wisdom of much contemporary thought. This starting point leads their contributors to oppose equalities legislation, and the promotion of social solidarity – at times they even actively campaign against equal rights in defence of traditional modes of inequality. This is a position that endears them to the conservative press like the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, the *Australian*, and the *Spectator*, for whom they also write. They believe that individuals are born free, and that, by and large, their future is in their own hands. Because of this they are of the view that people should have the maximum freedom to use their own initiative, talents, and skills, in the enjoyment of life, with as little intrusion by the state as possible. They have spun off a number of different campaigns, organizations, and some commercial enterprises, that while not exactly forming a solid bloc, have successfully created a milieu or circle which loosely deploys the idea of freedom to promote what their contributors like to call human endeavour and intellectual risk-taking. *Spiked* journalists are fearless radical thinkers who despite their

admiration for Saint-Simon, are nonetheless, conservative libertarians.

## Libertarian

The expression ‘libertarian’ is, like most political terms, extremely stretchy, extending from the far left to the far right. It encompasses anarchism that would abolish both, capitalism and the state, in order to construct a society entirely from the voluntary association of the mass of working people; it also embraces those on the right, committed to the defence of private property, and the limitation of the state to the maintenance of the armed forces, the police, prisons and the courts. Between these extremes libertarianism covers a bewildering range of political ideas, in which people with a prior commitment to individual liberty, seek maximum freedom from state supervision and control.

*Spiked* usually, but not always, occupies a place somewhat to the right of centre of these possible libertarian positions, progressive in intension, but conservative in practice. Inattentive to a sustained critique of capitalism, the focus of its journalism is upon challenging ‘political correctness’, and the absurdities of ‘trigger’ warnings, campus censorship, and the like. This has led them to an ideological focus in which they are only too aware of the debilitating nonsense spawned by a lack of coherent opposition to the powers that be, without asking what is it that actually inspires absurd attempts by students and others to censor a better world into existence.

*Spiked’s* relentless assaults upon the consequences of political malaise and confusion, rather than seeking the causes of this ideological paralysis, has trended their libertarianism to the right, whatever their intensions might be. Focus upon epiphenomena coupled with an apparent inability to develop a coherent analysis of the failure of anti-capitalism in its myriad guises, has led *Spiked*, time and again, to the defence of conservative ‘wisdom’.

Consequently, it is worth considering how an *idée fixe* concerning contemporary misanthropy, and the defence of human potential, has resulted, by and large, in a conservative libertarian orientation.

### *Living Marxism*

*Living Marxism* set sail on this turbulent libertarian sea of confusion following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of a belief in the prospects of a politics based upon the leading role of the working class. Still Marxist in a number of formal senses the writers and supporters of the magazine (through its metamorphosis into *LM* in 1996, and into *Spiked Online*, in 2001), cling to a conception of themselves as radical leftists committed to a rejection of the statist traditions represented by Stalinism, Trotskyism, and social democracy.

It is through their rejection of state regulation, and state interference in cultural and social affairs, that they understand their attachment to libertarianism. Their unconditional commitment to freedom of speech, their opposition to all immigration controls, and their rejection of equalities legislation, enables them to position themselves in the midst of many battles bravely violating the shibboleths of all comers, to their left and to their right.

Their most influential writers, Frank Furedi, Mick Hume, Michael Fitzpatrick, Rob Lyons, James Heartfield, Phil Mullan, and a number of others, changed tack some twenty years ago from engaging in a resolutely hierarchical political practice which endorsed the highly statist and authoritarian outlook of Bolshevism, to celebrating the virtues of liberty and the “values of the enlightenment” without missing a step or risking a backward glance. This move was not, of course, without some continuity. For many years before their break with Bolshevism and Leninism,

attacks on Labourism and the sacred cows of the broad left, had been their (and my own) stock in trade.<sup>1</sup> We represented a political trend that fought against the grain by refusing to endorse the outlook of leftist trade union bureaucracies and left-wing Labour councils, campaigns and movements, which despite their apparently radical credentials, were committed to ratifying the political outlook of mainstream politicians, while shying away from engaging in a thorough-going critique of labourism and its inherent commitment to the management of capitalism.

As a consequence we gained considerable notoriety as controversialists, often committed to gainsaying the most popular points of view on the left, and challenging the assumptions of many by continually stepping outside the parameters of the left-right, Tory-Labour, arguments which framed much political debate at the time. However, the collapse of the labour left with the arrival of Blair and New Labour robbed this outlook of its salience and its relevance. Labourism, the prime target of our critique had paled into insignificance as the entire locus of politics shifted internationally with the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, and domestically, with the defeat of Neil Kinnock in 1992.

It was this loss of their prime targets that led those who went on to transform *Living Marxism* into *LM* and then into *Spiked Online* to redirect their scorn on emerging mainstream assumptions concerning liberal progress in social policy and human rights. Long attuned to challenging the easy assumptions of much radical left thought they were able to set about disputing the verities of liberal opinion. They were able from the outset along this political road to identify a kind of political parsimony, which appeared to condemn much political life and engagement to a

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<sup>1</sup> See Don Milligan, 'Radical Amnesia and the Revolutionary Communist Party', January 8, 2008, [www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net).

lowering of expectations, a loss of courage, an aversion to risk, and a narrowing of ambition.

Hence, the strange process of falling silent about Marxism, their former commitments, and affiliations,<sup>2</sup> and the fulsome celebration of “enlightenment values”, fearless no-holds-barred argument, and an insistence upon the boldness of their outlook, and their courage in swimming against the stream, regardless of where the stream is taking them or their opponents.

### Low Expectations and Voluntarism

I remember being solemnly told by a leading comrade from this tradition that capitalism would never be able to afford to supply all and sundry with computers or equip shops and public buildings with ramps for people in wheelchairs or those pushing their kids’ buggies. Of course, it is true that ramps and lifts are not universal anymore than laptops or tablets, but they are considerably more widespread than anybody on the communist left in 1990 would have imagined possible. This is a small detail, but it is illustrative of the inability of many on the far left, including those who have ended up with *Spiked*, to understand the trajectory of social development in comparatively wealthy capitalist countries.

This readiness to regard capitalism as “late” and to bang on about the inherent inability of the system to endorse progress or forward thinking of any kind, in any sphere, has been a feature of left-wing thought for very many years, feeding into a conception of social development as one of relentless crisis. Now, of course the history of capitalism is indeed one of perpetual technical and social upheaval, booms and slumps, wars and revolutions. This is no doubt why in 1944 Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters sang:

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

You've got to ac-cen-tuate the positive  
 Eliminate the negative  
 Latch on to the affirmative  
 Don't mess with Mister In-Between

The forties were a boom time ‘for keeping your sunny side up’ in the midst of tragedy, mayhem, and murder on an industrial scale. Since then the system has barreled along, absorbing more and more, as millions fall under the wheels of the juggernaut without significant pause. In the midst of yet another period in which we appear to be perched on the slippery slope to yet another existential crisis we can be reasonably confident that capitalism has the capacity to survive both stagnation and crisis built into its DNA – what Marxists call “counteracting tendencies”. Yet the left has always favoured a conception of the system’s vulnerability to crisis, which will, in the fullness of time prove terminal, enabling us to step into the breach and build everything anew.

This rather lazy, almost millenarian attitude in which the mainstream ideas and the assumptions that guide much popular opinion are regarded as hopelessly out-of-step with the real movement of society – grasped only by the ‘Marxists’ of the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Socialist Workers Party, *Counterfire*, or *Spiked* – has dogged the left for many decades.

It has led not only to low expectations, regarding capitalism, and the millions of benighted run-of-the-mill ‘ordinary’ people caught in the web of bourgeois ideology; it has also led, paradoxically, to a kind of voluntarism in which the ideological clarity of radical socialists is thought to make things possible in real life, because we are guided by the perspectives dreamed up by our theoreticians and ideologues.

For the more conventional among us this means that workers’ control, and a socialist economy, are intrinsically unproblematic – of course the struggle for socialism will be long and difficult and probably bloody – but the dictatorship

of the proletariat and forging an economy from popular democratic institutions is not only eminently feasible – it will be plain sailing.

Of course, the controversialists over at *Spiked* would no longer have any truck with such nonsense. For them, voluntarism comes clothed in an apparently penetrating critique of the cultural assumptions of the liberal mainstream; they have identified the existence of something called “the liberal elite” (sometimes “the metropolitan cultural elite”) which they evidently believe can be held in check by relentless chastisement. The insurgent free-thinkers of *Spiked* and the Institute of Ideas – those engaged daily in “the battle of ideas” – appear to believe that culture and ideology have in some way, we’ve not quite understood, become detached from the material relations of the society, and are merely expressions of flawed opinion which can be put under pressure and eventually changed by excoriation, and by confrontation with right-thinking people, expressing right-thinking ideas.

So it is that those around *Spiked* note the infantilization of young people, and particularly of eighteen-year-olds being taken on trips to visit universities by their Mums and Dads – being delivered on the day of registration to the campus of their choice by parents in cars loaded down with home comforts and comestibles. This process is often discussed with scant regard to the way in which the disappearance of grants, rising rents, and the introduction of fees have inevitably increased the role of parents in the higher education of their children. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that many young people do not become financially independent of their parents until their mid to late twenties. This so-called ‘infantilization’ is not a product of some ideological intention on the part of anybody, it is quite evidently the result of profound changes in the structure of the labour market, housing, and the manner in which higher education is funded. It certainly entails real cultural change, but it is not produced by a “culture of low expectations”.

## State Ideology

The ideological weighting of *Spiked's* cultural critique has led to peculiar focus upon the state and its capacity to insinuate itself into every aspect of our lives. This is done in a manner similar to that of traditional libertarians of both left and right. The state, irrespective of any underlying analysis or commitments, is talked about as an institution that battens upon society, throttling initiative and the freedom of the individual, for purposes that the conservative libertarians at *Spiked* rarely bother to explain or even theorize.<sup>3</sup> There is much lambasting of popular psychology, and talk of an almost pathological commitment on behalf of the state to exercise control over the benighted individual. The means of transmission of this control is to be found in the relationship between the 'liberal elite' – those in the chattering classes capable of setting the agenda – and a matrix of institutions and organizations in the ever-widening charitable sector increasingly charged with carrying out government programmes, or developing policy and providing data and detailed analysis needed for the development of evermore intrusive legislation and supervision.

*Spiked* is not wrong about much of this. Since the inception of bourgeois control over the British state at the end of the seventeenth century, the reach of state institutions in Britain has grown exponentially. This growth has gone hand-in-hand with the development of capitalism.

Of course the state endorsement of philosophical and scientific endeavour pre-dates the Glorious Revolution by some years,<sup>4</sup> but the terms set out by Parliament for the

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<sup>3</sup> Of course there is some variation here, James Heartfield or Phil Mullan for example are more aware of the need to continue developing a critique of capitalism than, say, Mick Hume, but overall *Spiked's* contributors do not allow thoughts about capitalism to distract them from their *idée fixe* concerning contemporary misanthropy, and the defence of human potential.

<sup>4</sup> Around the middle of the 1640s a number of natural philosophers in England began meeting informally in what has been called an "invisible college". Following hard on the heels of the restoration of the monarchy twelve men met on November 28, 1660, at Gresham College to found 'a



accession of William and Mary to the throne opened up a much more active role for the state in creating conditions favourable for what Adam Smith would later call “commercial society”.<sup>5</sup> From the founding of the Bank of England in 1694 and the creation of the national debt to finance the struggle with France for colonial supremacy, onwards to the elaboration through the course of the eighteenth century of the criminal and civil law, and the emergence of a sophisticated apparatus of courts, prisons, and watchmen, resulting eventually in the inauguration of citizen police forces,<sup>6</sup> and attempts at the early regulation of labour conditions in mines and factories,<sup>7</sup> the state has played a central role in the life of bourgeois society.

Following Catholic Emancipation in 1829, and the fearful years of 1831 and 1832, the strategy of the ruling elements of British society was to pursue a policy of incorporation initially by extending the franchise to the propertied classes of the industrial centres, and after the defeat of Chartism, legalizing trade unionism, and eventually extending the

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Colledge for the Promoting of Physico-Mathematicall Experimentall Learning'. It quickly received the approval of the King and a royal charter naming it as 'The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge'.

<sup>5</sup> In February 1689 the Convention Parliament issued the Declaration of Right inviting William and Mary to become joint sovereigns. This was passed as the Bill of Rights on December 16, 1689. It set out the powers of Parliament and the terms upon which monarchs held the throne. With this act Britain became a constitutional monarchy in which Parliament determines the rights and duties of the Crown.

<sup>6</sup> After 1800 cities like Glasgow and Newcastle had local police forces, although Liverpool got along with night watchmen. The Metropolitan Police Act, 1829, established the first professional police service in London replacing the old system of constables and night watchmen. In 1835 the Municipal Corporations Act was passed by Parliament, which required 178 Royal Boroughs to set up paid police forces. In 1839 the Rural Constabulary Act allowed county areas to establish police forces; by 1851 some 29 county police forces had been established.

<sup>7</sup> The Health and Morals of Apprentices Act was passed in 1802 and was followed in 1819 by the Cotton Mills and Factories Act. There followed a long succession of bills Parliament voted into law throughout the course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, which addressed the employment of children and women, the hours worked, and issues concerning the health and welfare of industrial workers.

franchise to respectable working men who had the sense and good fortune to head stable households.<sup>8</sup>

Around the middle of the nineteenth century as soldiers and administrators faced difficulties following the Great Rebellion in India, the propertied classes ‘at home’ found themselves wrestling with the impact of burgeoning industrial cities and a vast and unruly urban working class.<sup>9</sup> In such circumstances the intrusions of the British state into the conduct of Indian affairs, and into the life of society more generally could not fail to do anything other than grow – indeed the state is a product of society and the need which ruling elites have for a collection of interlocking institutions to cohere and mobilize society’s resources for what they perceive as the common good.

As the system has grown and presented the ruling elite with ever-changing and ever-growing problems of control the reach of the bourgeois state has been extended into more and more areas of life, from the registration of births, deaths, and marriages in 1837,<sup>10</sup> to the introduction of limited liability in 1855 to assist with the regulation of insolvency and the declaration of bankruptcy, to the promotion of free compulsory elementary education for working class children after 1870. This, of course, involved the elucidation and consolidation of certain religious, imperial, and racial assumptions, which were beginning to emerge amongst the working class. With the conscription of children into the Board Schools the state became directly involved, not simply in the endorsement of particular cultural attitudes, but in their sustained promotion.

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<sup>8</sup> After vast agitations that greatly alarmed the authorities the Reform Act of 1867, and subsequent changes put in place during the following year, well over a million working class men won the vote – the act doubled the size of the electorate. All male urban householders and male lodgers paying £10 rent a year for unfurnished accommodation got the right to vote.

<sup>9</sup> See George Eliot’s *Felix Holt the Radical*, London: Blackwood, 1866. Ostensibly about the struggle surrounding the first reform act of 1832 the novel is actually a meditation upon the uproar surrounding the struggle for the enfranchisement of working men which resulted in the reform act of 1867

<sup>10</sup> The state registration of births, deaths, and marriages, was initiated in response to the increase in the size and number of non-conformist and Roman Catholic congregations, which resulted in increasing numbers of people being born, married, and dying, unrecorded by Anglican parishes.

Something similar occurred regarding the censorship of popular entertainments. Following the repeal of the Licensing Act (1662) in 1694 political censorship by the state was considerably weakened. This deficiency was redressed to some extent by the Licensing Act of 1737, under which, the Lord Chamberlain's office could censor theatre performances for any reason at all. The wide scope of this law was reined in by the Theatres Act (1843), which restricted the exercise of the Lord Chamberlain's powers to the preservation of decorum, good manners, and the maintenance of public order. These powers over theatrical performances were finally abolished in 1968.

There was also a mixed development regarding the censorship of movies. The Cinematograph Act 1909 was a licensing act introduced primarily to protect the public from fires and other mishaps at pictures shows. However, the following year local authorities were able to extend the use of this act from concerns for the physical safety of picture goers to the banning of films that local authorities regarded as morally or ethically dangerous. In 1912 the film industry responded to this challenge by establishing the British Board of Film Censors,<sup>11</sup> which deflected state or local authority interference with a system of self-censorship managed by the movie distributors and filmmakers.<sup>12</sup>

Evidently there is nothing new about the state taking an interest in the regulation of cultural production,<sup>13</sup> morality, or the determination of good manners, from the prohibition of abortion, to use of the word "nigger"<sup>14</sup> or exhibitions of

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<sup>11</sup> In 1984 the British Board of Film Censors changed its name to the British Board of Film Classification in order to reflect the growing importance of its role in classification rather than censorship.

<sup>12</sup> During the Second World War the state took direct control of movie censorship through the supervision imposed by the Ministry of Information. This came to an end with the dissolution of the ministry in March 1946.

<sup>13</sup> The role of the Master of the Revels emerged during the fourteenth century as the person responsible for theatrical entertainments at court. His role in the censorship of theatrical performances was transferred to the office of the Lord Chamberlain in 1624.

<sup>14</sup> In 1999, ITV broadcast a censored version of the 1955 film, *Dambusters*, with all instances of the dog's name, Nigger, removed. The dog, a black labrador retriever belonged to Wing Commander Guy Gibson, the man leading the bombing raids on the Ruhr Valley dams in May 1943 depicted in

public nudity. So, it is difficult to fathom the reasons for *Spiked's* irate focus upon the state's intrusion into matters of private conduct and cultural expression, as if this were some kind of recent, urgent, or sinister development. Of course, we should always keep a wary eye on what the authorities are up to, but the state's attempt to regulate private conduct, manners, and morals, and to assume a role in the maintenance of what passes for decorum at any particular time, is venerable indeed – it is certainly not a product of the 'nanny state', 'political correctness', or of 'a cultural of low expectations'.

### Public Opinion and the State

Journalists at *Spiked* are, I think, broadly correct in thinking that alterations in public opinions and changes in public attitudes, generally precede changes in the law. They are wrong however in taking the view that legal reforms, which seek to bring legislation into alignment with public opinion, are unnecessary and malign in some unspecified manner.

They are wrong about this, because the overriding concern of the authorities is not the endorsement of this or that social attitude, but the upholding what they call "respect for the law". This means that as society changes a gap is likely to emerge between common social attitudes and assumptions, and the laws framed in a previous period. Consequently, laws either become dead letters, rarely, if ever, enforced, or they must be repealed or updated in order to remain relevant to contemporary conditions.

It is entirely true that the growing acceptance in Britain of racial and ethnic diversity preceded, and in some senses marched in step with the imposition of a series of race relations laws from 1965 to the Equality Act 2010. Similarly, the legal emancipation of homosexuals came in stages, as a response, in stages, to changes in public opinion

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the film. When ITV again showed a censored version in June 2001, it was criticised by Index on Censorship as "unnecessary and ridiculous".

from 1953 to 2013.<sup>15</sup> This is because the primary concern of the bourgeois state is the defence of private property, the right of capital to seek ‘self-expansion’ by the employment of waged labour, and the maintenance of social coherence and stability consonant with these primary goals.

Despite everything I, and most other socialists and communists (including those in Revolutionary Communist Party),<sup>16</sup> might have argued in the seventies or eighties of the last century, it is evident that the capitalist class has no particular commitment to ‘Victorian Values’, or fixed conceptions of marriage or family life. The courts and the legislators in Parliament have amply proved that they are perfectly prepared to ‘move with the times’ provided that it can be demonstrated that social stability and good order can be guaranteed.

So, as marriage became companionship marriage, stripped of many of its former entailments and associations, so the exclusion of homosexuals from the institution became irrational, and quite simply indefensible without recourse to religious prohibitions or outmoded conceptions of ‘natural law’. Consequently, bourgeois democratic states, once assured of public support, and reassured that such a move has no hidden or negative fiscal implications, will endorse marriage equality.

Now, despite *Spiked’s* wretched record of opposing marriage equality,<sup>17</sup> its journalists are quite right to suggest

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<sup>15</sup> In 1953 The Moral Welfare Council of the Church of England was concerned about the persecution and criminalization of homosexual men, who were in all respects, other than their sexuality, entirely respectable and reliable members of the community. The church’s deliberations led to the establishment of the committee, chaired by John Wolfenden, and to the publication of that committee’s report in 1957, which recommended a partial decriminalization of homosexuality. These recommendations became law in 1967. Homosexuality was finally and fully legalized, and equal rights, civil and criminal, for homosexuals were established by a series of statutes enacted between 2001 and 2013.

<sup>16</sup> The Revolutionary Communist Tendency, a breakaway from the Socialist Workers Party, was founded in 1978. It became the Revolutionary Communist Party in 1981 and was dissolved in 1997. It lives on in somewhat spectral form in the circle of people and organizations grouped around *Spiked*.

<sup>17</sup> See Don Milligan, ‘Gay Marriage Spiked’, *Off The Cuff*, 22/03/12; and ‘Gays Spiked Again’, *Off The Cuff*, 15/04/12 at [www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net); and

that the state and prominent politicians take great comfort from being able to present themselves as paragons of liberal virtue. They evidently have an agenda all their own, which has little to do with the welfare or the comfort of homosexuals. But, it was ever thus.

I have no doubt that British politicians and the state institutions basked in the afterglow of their Christian humanity when abolishing the slave trade in 1807 and chattel slavery itself in 1833, without a second thought about the needs of British industry for free trade rather than the mercantilist protections so necessary to the slave owners and sugar planters of the British West Indies.<sup>18</sup> It is notable that most humanitarian free traders raised little objection to the reliance of Manchester and Rochdale upon slave-produced cotton until the defeat of the Confederate States of America in 1865.

This perfidy and these deceptions are well known. However, they do not in any sense undermine the importance of the abolition of slavery or the rightness of progressive forces, whether primarily Christian or republican, in fighting for these gains. It is the same today. A state might wear freedom, equality, democracy, friendship for homosexuals, commitment to free speech, on its lapel while the bourgeois political class seeks to hide its own perfidious hypocrisy under its virtues. None of this, however, should be used to attack or undermine freedom, democracy, and equality, or be used to attack the struggle to realize these rights more fully.

## Equality

**I**n opposing equality, equal rights, and insisting upon the right to discriminate, *Spiked* contributors are entering a terrain in which simplistic positions and assertions lead to confusion and an endorsement of frankly reactionary

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<sup>18</sup> 'The Straightening out of Homosexuals: Natural Law, and Marriage Equality', May 25, 2015, at *Articles*, [www.donmilligan.net](http://www.donmilligan.net)

<sup>18</sup> See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 1944, London: Andre Deutsch, 1987, *passim*.

points of view. It is the case that members of the all-male Garrick Club have every legal right to refuse women membership, and should indeed continue to have the legal right to so – it is after all a private club – and like a church, synagogue, or mosque, it is entirely free to discriminate against whomever it likes. However, it is also reasonable and progressive to argue against such discriminatory decisions, just as it is entirely reasonable to argue against Muslims, Christians, and Jews, who continue to insist upon discriminating against their homosexual co-religionists. The fact that people in private clubs and religious bodies should continue to be legally free to discriminate does not in any way prevent those opposed to such discrimination from voicing their opposition – we do after all believe in freedom of speech and in our right to offend.

So it is entirely reasonable, necessary, and progressive to voice opposition to the discriminatory decisions of the Garrick in a way that it would not be reasonable to oppose the exclusively female membership of the Women's Institute or the restriction of the membership of a gay men's choir to homosexual men. This is because the Garrick occupies a completely different role, status, and history, within elite circles, than the other examples cited, and is redolent of the continued exclusion of women from leading positions in society.

Now it is certainly the case women have made enormous strides in education, employment, and pay, particularly in the professions and in wider areas of graduate employment – where it can be argued that women have already achieved equality. However, even in wealthy bourgeois democracies women have not yet achieved equal status or representation in the leadership of most professions, in learned institutions, commercial enterprises, or in ministries and public bodies. Nor it must be said is there much sign of equality in the performance of domestic tasks or the provision of childcare. There is much still to do and achieve, and it is perfectly reasonable to challenge the Garrick and other holdouts without surrendering to a “loss of faith in Western values”.

*Spiked's* argument against some new feminist writers for attacking the scientific work of Isaac Newton as misogynist, or insisting that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* should carry a 'trigger' warning because it contains references to sexual assault, is entirely sound. However, Brendan O'Neill's widening of the case to the assertion that new feminism is "the keenest expression" of "mainstream misanthropy and [of the] turn against Enlightenment thought of the modern West" is nonsense. He asks suspiciously, that if political radicalism is on the wane, and life for Western women has vastly improved, why has feminism "become the most fashionable political position of our time – what's this all about?"

Brendan doesn't tell us much other than the fact that writers like Jacqueline Rose and Beatrix Campbell are the enemies of the Enlightenment, of economic growth, modernity, and the mankind's struggle to bend the world and all its resources to humanity's needs and desires. This is no doubt true. He also acknowledges that not all feminists think alike and that some are engaged in the struggle for choice and freedom of speech – but he insists, absurdly, that new feminism is "the closest thing we currently have to a ruling class ideology."<sup>19</sup>

This is something of a leap. The ruling classes of bourgeois democracies have by and large endorsed the need for women's equality and have identified the subordinate position of women in many poor countries as a key element in holding back economic development. (An observation that we should surely support.) However, the ruling class has not yet been won over to a feminist opposition to growth, or to what Beatrix Campbell has called "modernity's Faustian recklessness" with regard to the burning of fossil fuels and much else. The outlook of the ruling class is not characterized by an opposition to economic growth, opposition to the widespread application of robots and automation, to innovation, or to the expansion of economic

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<sup>19</sup> See Brendan O'Neil, 'Feminism and the Turn Against Enlightenment: The new feminism and the gloss on the West's loss of faith in itself', *Spiked*, June 11, 2015.



activity – nothing could be further from the truth. It is simply foolish to suggest otherwise.

We should oppose feminists and others when they attack economic growth, technical innovation, the development of science, universal values, and the fearless study and enjoyment of the literature and arts of the past. There can be no doubt about that. But, there should equally be no doubt concerning our defence of equal rights for all, and the insistence that the state should defend the exercise of these rights by all and sundry.

The relentless case made by the journalists at *Spiked* against equality, and against equalities legislation, commits them to upholding boldly reactionary positions on the grounds that such laws are either unnecessary, because people in question are no longer subjected to widespread discrimination, or that the particular forms of discrimination are entirely justified, “because we all make discriminatory judgments on a daily basis”. Indeed we do, however, these discriminations, concerning friends, our tastes, or who we want to spend time with, cannot be compared with the practice of discrimination against particular types or classes of person in employment, in public places or the in the provision of services routinely offered to the general public. It is specious to argue otherwise.

Yet, *Spiked* frequently does, because it wants to uphold the right to discriminate as an expression of freedom and liberty from state interference and control.

### The Defence of Universal Values

It is surely paradoxical that *Spiked* likes to associate itself with the defence of universal values while opposing one of the greatest gains of bourgeois democratic societies – the extension of formal equality before the law, equality in access to education, to political rights, and access to the state’s protection. The universal values to which *Spiked’s* contributors appeal are unashamedly products of European cultural and political developments and are most particularly

the achievement of wealthy, fully developed, capitalist societies.

Far from there being a retreat from these values it is plain that by advocating the extension, indeed the universalizing of political rights associated with the rule of law, equality before the law, and responsible government, Western politicians and regimes promote ‘universal values’; they are integral components of the outlook advocated by the West – despite the perfidy and hypocrisy that is inherent in the articulation of these ideals by Britain or America, France or Germany, and the international institutions which they seek perpetually to dominate.

Equal access of girls and women to education, free elections, government free from corruption, freedom of expression, freedom of minorities whether racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual – all of these struggles are essential aspects of the struggle for universal values which must be ranged against venerable cultural particularities encountered around the world. There is no doubt these struggles are bound up with the promotion of Western interests which are anything but benign, but that does not mean that we should not stand full square for their promotion universally – throughout the world – regardless of the claims of nationalist elites and religious and political reactionaries around the globe.

So, the struggle for equality, and for the genuine achievement, rather than the purely cosmetic appearance of equality, must be ongoing. This most assuredly will involve mobilizing the resources of the existing apparatus of the law and of the capitalist state against enforced marriages, murders prompted by traditional notions of family honour, female genital mutilation, attempts to pay women less than men, and to employ migrants on worse terms than indigenous workers, and so on. This is because there is a very real relationship between the state endorsing and supporting certain opinions and practices, by legislation, and the consolidation of the general public’s advance towards the full realization of universal values. There is, dare I say it, a dialectical relationship between the state and public

opinion, of which the conservative libertarians at *Spiked* seem to be blithely unaware.

We have built upon the British Parliament's Bill of Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen,<sup>20</sup> and the work of Thomas Jefferson and General Lafayette.

The early bourgeois slogan, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" was an explicitly political slogan concerning the state. It was an assertion of the revolutionary abolition of the aristocracy's privileged access to the state and its protections, and of the opening up of government contracts and jobs, justice and the law, to all citizens regardless of their birth. It was about the nature of the state; there was nothing libertarian about it.

As advanced bourgeois states began to discover that the incorporation of the 'popular classes' by extensions of the franchise and other political and social measures was the most effective way of stabilizing the rule of landowners, merchants, and manufacturers, the bourgeoisie began the painful process of opting for democracy. This opened the road towards a continuous struggle waged by women, black people, and the working class more generally, from the 1830s onwards, to widen the meaning of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity". In taking up the revolutionary bourgeois slogan democratic movements gave it a wider and more thoroughgoing meaning. We have not only developed ideas about the rights of women, equality for all regardless of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, but have also developed thoughts on the rights of the child, which prohibit the subjection of children to physical violence and chastisement, which have for millennia been unexceptional in most societies in the world.

All of these matters involve complicated social, political, economic, and legal struggles in order to advance and

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<sup>20</sup> Bill of Rights passed by Parliament in London in December 1689 under which the constitutional monarchy and the primacy of lawful government was established; and the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, passed by the revolutionary National Constituent Assembly in Paris in August 1789.

realize universal values and equal rights for all; it is simply, ludicrous to think otherwise.

Anarchist libertarians, whether one agrees with them or not, have an intellectually coherent outlook in positing the abolition of the state and the establishment of a society based entirely upon voluntary association. This does not apply to the conservative libertarians at *Spiked* who believe in the retention of the state, but think that Parliament and state institutions should have no role whatsoever in advancing, guaranteeing or protecting the realization of the universal rights of the citizen.

In some abstract and rarely voiced sense many of *Spiked's* writers and supporters probably imagine a future for the state as something other than the defender of private property and capitalist social relations – the state may become a collection of institutions that might one day endorse freedom without qualification, and become a matrix amidst which a politics based upon the affirmation of authentically human values might flourish. But, until that day dawns *Spiked's* contributors have set their face sternly against any compromise other than writing for the Tory press and opposing gay marriage and equalities legislation.

### Rhetorical Simplicities

**A**lthough *Spiked* is well written it suffers from a process of journalistic simplification most commonly found in the popular right-wing press. The difficulty here is that the Tory press knows that by reflecting popular prejudices and opinions it is able to cut with the grain of an outlook that tends to arise spontaneously within the life of society – that the country is simply too small to take in any more migrants – that generous benefits encourage the lazy and feckless to lives of idleness at the taxpayers expense. This reliance on received opinions enables the popular press to employ extremely simple headlines and advocacy for the articulation of points of view that are well understood by their habitual readers.

Unfortunately, this assertive clarity is not often available to those critical of existing social and political arrangements – not if you want avoid gross distortions and misunderstandings of your point of view. More importantly and perhaps deeper than this is the fact that the tendency towards simplifying the message may also result in surrendering to reaction by opposing one set of received opinions with another. This occurred most notoriously in the way in which *Spiked* counterposed traditional heterosexual marriage contracted for the generation and care of children, with the barren and merely ‘companionship marriage’ sought by some homosexuals. This line even led to the editor of *Spiked* teaming up with Mark Jones of Solas-Centre for Public Christianity, in order to go with him to the Palace of Westminster and jointly to make the case for heterosexual marriage free from homosexual incursions, which would if legalised, they argued, undermine the significance and value of the traditional institution.<sup>21</sup>

Instead of making a case consistent with libertarian pretensions by opposing the state’s registration of marriages of any sort *Spiked* cobbled up an argument that defended the *status quo ante* in which they actually endorsed the state registration of marriage, and simply opposed Parliament’s acceptance of profound changes in public attitudes towards homosexuals by arguing for the continued prohibition of gay marriage.

Something similar occurred with regard to opposition to what the magazine’s writers like to call ‘determinism’. In this case, the editor of *Spiked*, Brendan O’Neill, in an article for his *Telegraph* blog supported the argument of the Core Issues Trust, a religious group that opposed determinism by canvassing the idea that homosexual orientation was optional and certainly not determined biologically – consequently, this group offers its therapeutic services to homosexuals

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<sup>21</sup> This occurred on February 14, 2013 when Brendan O’Neill of *Spiked*, and Mark Jones of Solas-Centre for Public Christianity, jointly gave evidence before the Commons Committee on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill. See the Solas-CPC video on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xf08KmJg1yw>.

who want to straighten themselves out.<sup>22</sup> Although expressing skepticism concerning the therapy O'Neill approved the way these Bible Christians counterposed 'human agency' to the dreary determinism of the gay activists opposing them.

Clearly Brendan believes (or believed at the time) that there is a simple opposition at play between biological determinism and human agency and, because he was writing for *The Telegraph*, he knew which side he was on. The trouble was that in conflating the notion of 'gay lifestyles', which evidently can be relearned, with sexual feelings for ones own sex, that in most cases cannot be altered, simply compounded the confusion. This confusion is caused by the simplistic notion that things socially determined are, by definition, mutable and subject to conscious human agency, as opposed to biological determinations, which are not susceptible to psychological or political intervention. Brendan's simple counterpositions resulted in muddling up social conduct with sexual orientation, and made implicit and unwarranted assumptions concerning the mutability of desire. In his burning need to defend human agency *Spiked's* editor found himself somewhat paradoxically lining up with Bible Christians who as is well known are not fans of human agency or of anything other than the predeterminations of God's Plan.

There are other frankly absurd examples of this simplifying move by the counterposition of one received opinion with another when. For example, a writer in *Spiked* opined recently that the idea and development of driverless cars carried with it "The assumption that it is desirable to diminish human agency by petrifying our current moral choices [and] displays a deep distrust of mankind and our ability to develop socially and morally."<sup>23</sup> He continued to attack "the misanthropy underpinning the idea of the driverless car" and followed these pretentious 'insights' with

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<sup>22</sup> Brendan O'Neill, 'The "bus advert storm" confirms that Christians are now more progressive than gay rights activist', *The Telegraph*, Blog Feed, April 13, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Norman Lewis, 'The Driverless Car and the Fall of Man', *Spiked*, April 20, 2015.

woebegone confusion: “These new cars are seeking to automate the limits of contemporary society and strap mankind into a safety-first, predictable, fixed and static universe.”

The idea that a development as extraordinary as driverless road vehicles will pin us down in a static unchanging universe is so patently absurd that it’s difficult to know where to begin enumerating the huge changes that the technologies associated with this development are likely to bring about. One thing is certain “human agency” will survive driverless cars just fine. Once again a *Spiked* author overstates his case and lands up where he didn’t expect to be, on the wrong side of progress, hunkering down with reactionaries.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that *Spiked* does not have a strict party line, and it may well be that this article ‘The Driverless Car and the Fall of Man’ might have simply been a “thought experiment” blown off course by an over zealous sub-editor given to writing ludicrous headlines, and laughable straplines like: “The quest for robotic cars is underwritten by a suspicion of humanity.” But still, it is an example of what has become something of a tradition that began in *The Next Step* and *Living Marxism*, was given free rein in *LM*, and has found a new lease of life in *Spiked*.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this appeared in *Living Marxism* in 1992 when it carried on its front cover “The Serbs ‘White Niggers’ of the New World Order”.<sup>24</sup> This thought sprang from the observation that most Western media was holding the Serbs responsible for the break up of Yugoslavia and ignoring the massacres and injustices being heaped on Serbian communities while focusing almost entirely on crimes committed by Serbs. Eddie Veale, better known as Mick Hume, the author of this article and headline, was not wrong. The crimes of Croats and others were receiving scant attention; the focus of Bonn, Berlin, London, and Washington, was all upon the culpability of the Serbs.

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<sup>24</sup> *Living Marxism*, No. 45, July 1992.

This headline sprang from a simplistic notion of imperialism and of the need to gainsay anything that the supporters of wealthy bourgeois states might be arguing. It was certainly informed the belief that Croatia was being turned into a German colony. The blunt counterposition authored by Mick Hume and Joan Phillips led *Living Marxism* down the road of supporting Serbs and Serbia at every turn in the unfolding civil war. They went to great lengths to trash the idea of Croatian nationhood while arguing in defence of Yugoslavia and of Serbia. Of course, from time to time they were prepared to criticize Serbian nationalist politicians, but always their principal enemy was Western imperialism and their principal ally the Serbs and Serbia.

Instead of understanding the break up of Yugoslavia as a product of the terminal decay of a Stalinist dictatorship and the reemergence of national animosities that had festered and grown under the carapace of Marshal Tito's League of Communists, *Living Marxism* directed all its fire upon imperialism and external interests. The RCP and *Living Marxism* set off down the road of favouring one nationality over another – identifying one as implicitly anti-imperialist and others as the pawns of the Western powers. Their attachment to rhetorical devices, which sought to impose radical clarity on an intrinsically difficult and many-sided struggle, drew them into partisanship with Serb nationalism – and eventually to *LM* being sued out of existence.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ed Vulliamy and ITN were wrong to use the High Court against *Living Marxism* in the dispute about Serb-run camps in Bosnia. They should simply have rebutted *Living Marxism*'s suggestions that they were inventing atrocities and distorting realities on the ground. These camps in which many crimes were committed against inmates were ramshackle and hastily organized affairs. Consequently, it matters not one jot whether a group of prisoners photographed behind barbed wire were completely imprisoned by the fence – I have no doubt that some prisoners will have escaped fairly easily by slipping unnoticed through flimsy barriers and poorly guarded perimeters. This does not, of course, contradict or undermine evidence that Serbian police and soldiers were running camps in which Bosniaks they'd rounded up in armed raids on Muslim households were being starved, tortured, raped, and murdered at random. See David Campbell, 'Atrocity, Memory, Photography', Part I *Journal of Human Rights*, VOL. 1, NO. 1 (March 2002), 1–33; and Part II *Journal of Human Rights*, VOL. 1, NO. 2 (June 2002), 143–172.



The irony here is that despite the large degree of separation that the RCP (and what we might call its ‘legacy milieu’, with *Spiked* at its centre), has always maintained between itself and wider left-wing circles, it continues to share with this leftist tradition a simplistic response towards imperialism. It is common for people on the left to engage in elaborate apologetics or even smile upon dictatorial regimes and reactionary movements of many different stripes as long as they can be described as ‘anti-imperialist’. *Spiked* shares this failing with the broad left because, despite its conservative libertarian orientation, despite its fearless battle with humbug and hypocrisy, it is riddled through with leftist prejudices which it seems unable to rid itself – these prejudices are, so to speak, indelible marks, left by its birth in the neo-Trotskyist world of the seventies.

For all *Spiked*’s fearlessness, and despite its determination to question everything, the one thing it doesn’t appear able to do is to question its own preconceptions and settled opinions.

### Getting it Right

**N**ot everything *Spiked* and the milieu it sponsors is wrong. Recently Mick Hume wrote an interesting article on foxhunting. Of course the article carried the usual absurdly tendentious strap: ‘The pro-fox crusade is a mask for those hunting down human liberties’. However, leaving rhetorical excess to one side, I was amused when I realized that the article was effective in challenging one of my heartfelt prejudices. Mick wrote that foxhunting should not be banned simply because it outrages those who oppose the pastime.<sup>26</sup>

It is true that I hate foxhunting because I hate the idea of City gents, posh landowners, tenant farmers, and their hangers-on, celebrating their domination of the countryside by racing across it on horseback with a pack of forty hounds in order to kill a solitary, sleek and rather beautiful creature.

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<sup>26</sup> Mick Hume, ‘They Don’t Give a Flying Fox About Hunting’, *Spiked*, July 15, 2015.

My opposition has nothing to do with pest control, of which I know little, or the welfare of foxes of which I know even less. My attitude to foxhunting is akin to my attitude to the Garrick Club – I find both appalling. But, Mick Hume is entirely right to argue that one's personal predilections and prejudices are not sufficient grounds for banning anything. So he changed my mind on that – now I'm both opposed to foxhunting and also to attempts to ban it, unless very good reasons (quite apart from an atavistic hatred of grandees on horseback), can be produced to justify culling large numbers of beagles, and the prohibition of a sport by the state.

Clearly, *Spiked's* belief that we should oppose the use of state power to ban pastimes, speech, and opinions, simply because some people, or even a majority of people, find them offensive is entirely right. In the first instance our instinct should always be against the use of the law for such nefarious purposes.

The trouble with *Spiked* is not its commitment to free speech or to freedom, or even its focus upon the epiphenomena of our current political malaise, it is to be found in a desire for 'topicality' and 'relevance', and even contrariness, in the struggle against received opinions. It engages in a great deal of nonsense, is flirtatious towards right-wing libertarians, while leaving the development of a serious critique of capitalism and serious discussion of the current conjuncture to a leftwing milling about in confusion, with only the verities and home truths of yesteryear to keep them going.

If *Spiked* is going to make a real contribution to informing and stimulating those who want to challenge capitalism it is going to have to stop hiding its communist light under a bushel, its going to have to dig itself out of the conservative libertarian mire into which it has slipped, and fight to develop an understanding of society capable of inspiring genuine resistance to the powers that be, rather than seeking always to defend us from the latest obsession of the chattering classes.