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EDITORIAL *Martin Levy*

JOHN BALL, THE ENGLISH PEASANTS' REVOLT, AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY *James Crossley*

FRED THOMPSON, THE TGWU, THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE MINORITY MOVEMENT *Graham Stevenson*

IN DEFENCE OF THE LAWS OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM *Ruth Pitman*

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SOUL FOOD: ON WRITING THATCHER – POETRY, PARTICULARITY, AND WITNESSING TO HISTORY *Fran Lock*





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COVER IMAGE

Jean Froissart, *Chronicles* – Bibliothèque nationale de France. Richard II meeting with the rebels of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

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MARTIN LEVY

EDITORIAL: 100 not out!



21 June 2021

IN CRICKET, as in life, a century is a cause for celebration. For *Communist Review*, this 100th edition should be a matter of taking stock. How have we done?

We are not the first publication of Britain's Communist Party to hold this title. *The Communist Review* ran monthly from May 1921 to about 1928, then there was a new monthly series from January 1929 to August 1935. At some point before May 1933, the cover title changed to *Communist Review*, and that was how the journal was known when it ran again, monthly, from March 1946 to December 1953. So this is actually the fourth series.

In between the third series and this, the Party's theoretical and discussion journal was the monthly *Marxism Today* (1957-91), which provided a sterling service under the editorship of James Klugmann. However, after he stood down (tragically, dying shortly afterwards), that title became the organising centre for the Eurocommunist, revisionist, faction in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), which eventually liquidated the organisation.

Before that happened, there had been the Communist Campaign Group (CCG), and then the Party was re-established as the Communist Party of Britain in 1988. The CCG had its own journal, *Communist Campaign Review* (7 editions, 1986-88), and this was the basis – in fact, with the same editors – for the re-established *Communist Review*, whose first edition appeared in Autumn 1988. It is not surprising that early editions had a significant focus on the fight against revisionism.

In terms of longevity, the current series of *CR* has been running for more years than the total publication period of our predecessors of the same name. If we include the *Communist Campaign Review*, we have actually been publishing for longer than *Marxism Today* did. However, in terms of editions and circulation, of course a quarterly journal falls well short of a monthly. Indeed, there were times in our first half-century when we only averaged two editions a year. There is a world of difference between having a full-time paid editor, and the current situation of a part-time volunteer editorial, design and despatch team. But the journal is still here, the quarterly production is stable, and the circulation, like Party membership, is growing significantly. Unfortunately, increased postage rates and other costs mean that we are having to increase some subscription rates.

At present, print subscribers can, using a code supplied by the Party office, access the digital versions of *CR*31-36 and *CR*53-100 via the members' area of the Party web site. There are plans to move all of these to the front side of the site and, in the fullness of time, to digitise the remaining editions. A searchable index will also be placed online. Not yet complete, it shows that, for the first 50 issues, there were 432 articles, editorials, letters and statements from an impressive 177 authors and 26 groups and organisations. Unfortunately only 17% of the individual contributors were women. That figure has increased to 22% for the most recent 18 editions, but it is still far too low. In our next

issue, we hope to make a small change towards remedying that, by publishing the contributions at the Party's 'Sisterhood, Socialism and Struggle' online conference, held on May 8.

The past 33 years, since 1988, have seen enormous changes politically and economically, including: the downfall of socialism in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe; globalisation; imperialist wars on Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya; left advances and retreats in Latin America; the rise and fall of New Labour; the economic advance of People's China; and much more. Articles in this journal have sought to get to grips with such developments, and to encourage discussion. We have also sought to provide 'something for everyone', including poetry, culture, economics, current politics, environment, developments in the world of work, women's rights, anti-racism, internationalism, philosophy, history, biography, book reviews – and of course Covid-19.

We have over the years marked a number of significant anniversaries: 75 years since VE-Day 1945; the centenaries of the First World War, the Dublin Easter Rising, the Russian Revolutions of 1917 and the foundation of Britain's Communist Party; 150 years since the publication of Marx's *Capital* and since the Paris Commune; and the bicentenaries of the births of Marx and Engels. All of these have provided opportunities for reflection, analysis and political education.

We can always do better. Suggestions from readers are welcome.

The current edition marks yet another anniversary: 640 years from the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381. In our lead article, historian James Crossley looks at how William Morris and later the CPGB adopted a historical materialist approach to that event, and how that in turn inspired cultural activities and a recognition of the importance of cherishing democratic traditions in our own history.

We follow that with the last article submitted by tragically departed Graham Stevenson – a biography of Fred Thompson, dockers' leader, Communist and Minority Movement activist in the early years of both the Communist Party and the Transport & General Workers' Union. Then we have two theoretical contributions: a defence by Ruth Pitman of the laws of dialectical materialism – a rejoinder to comments made by John Green in his appreciation of Engels in *CR*97; and an examination by Martin Jenkins of how Marx's and Engels' critique of Max Stirner led them to a final breach with Ludwig Feuerbach's notion of "human essence".

We round off with: Marc Vandepitte, showing how young people's concerns have been neglected by governments during the Covid crisis; a letter from the Communist Party of Greece, criticising a statement made in the article 'Communist Internationalism: Completing the Century', in *CR*97; and Fran Lock's Soul Food column, criticising media presentations of late Tory prime minister Margaret Thatcher, and contrasting them with some really excellent anti-Thatcher poems.

History, culture, theory, politics, debate – something for everyone. Onward to the next 100!



JAMES CROSSLEY JOHN BALL, THE ENGLISH PEASANTS' REVOLT AND THE COMMUNIST PARTY



‘The end of the 1930s began the most influential Communist presentations of Ball in face of the rising fascist threat. Fascism was seen as imperialism at its most reactionary, and a hindrance to the transformation to socialism. Thus, the Popular Front line of the late 1930s looked to the development of national anti-fascist resistance with rediscovered progressive national traditions – to counter fascist and English nationalist demagoguery – to be connected with international struggles and infused with socialist ideas, though they were also to be presented in a non-sectarian manner and in ways that would appeal more broadly outside Party circles.’



640 YEARS AGO, the failed English uprising of 1381 (the so-called Peasants’ Revolt) brought to the fore the demands of the lower orders in a way unheard of in English history. Following decades of tensions between the lords and labourers after the Black Death, the uprising exploded around parts of England and most famously in the South East, where rebels from Kent and Essex, led by figures such as Wat Tyler, entered London and attacked political, legal, and ecclesiastical targets. Most remarkably, rebels even managed to behead leading figures of the realm, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The priest John Ball was known for articulating the rebels’ interests in theological and class-based terms. He called for the end of serfdom, most memorably through the couplet, “When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?” Ball endorsed the violence of the uprising with reference to the Bible and looked to a new England where everything would be held in common.

After the bloody quelling of the revolt, Ball and the rebels were the subject of new attacks from the historians and intelligentsia of the ruling class for the next 400 years. But as serfdom became increasingly a practice of the distant past with the emergence of bourgeois capitalism, it became more difficult to condemn the rebels entirely. Ball’s full rehabilitation came after the American and French revolutions and in the context of the English radicalism of the 1790s where he was seen as a defender of lost English liberties and even an English Jacobin. During the nineteenth century, this rehabilitation regularly took two forms – reformist or revolutionary – and was then given a more sophisticated interpretation with the emergence of Marxism and socialism.

The most famous and influential example from the late nineteenth century was William Morris’s *A Dream of John Ball*, first serialised in 1886-87. Developing similar ideas in nascent British Marxism, Morris presented a historical materialist reading of the 1381 uprising by explaining, in story form, the theory of the transformation from feudalism to capitalism and then to socialism and communism.

ABOVE: An illustration of the priest John Ball (“Jehā Balle”) on a horse encouraging Wat Tyler’s rebels (“Waultre le tieulier”) of 1381, from a ca. 1470 manuscript of Jean Froissart’s *Chronicles* in the British Library. There are two flags of England (St. George’s cross flags) and two banners of the Plantagenet royal coat of arms of England (quarterly France ancient and England), and an implausible number of unmounted soldiers wearing full plate armour among the rebels.



▲ Illustration by E Burne-Jones for Morris's *A Dream of John Ball* illustrated in the couplet "When Adam delved and Eve span / Who was then the gentleman?"

Morris was able to explain why Ball's vision of an England transformed was a failure – crudely put, revolution in the feudal era was too far ahead of its time – while he maintained Ball's relevance in using him as a revolutionary example of the dedication and sacrifice needed to help bring about socialist transformation. British Marxists continued this historical materialist approach after Morris's death, but it was primarily the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), founded in 1920, that kept this tradition alive for much of the twentieth century.

Bolshevik Ball

Critics of Bolshevism were worried that a new John Ball would re-emerge emboldened, and they stoked older fears of mob violence in London. While some of the discussion was as shrill as might be expected, the Bolshevik Ball was a connection also being made by Communists and other figures sympathetic to the CPGB. *The Communist*, the first newspaper of the CPGB (1920-1923, after which it was replaced by the *Workers Weekly*), had a regular column called 'Industrial Notes' written under the pen name, 'John Ball'; while one of the editors, the working-class intellectual TA Jackson, was a regular promoter of the legacy of Ball. *The Communist* included various other relevant articles, including Alexander John on how Ball was the intellectual force of the uprising and a revolutionary preacher of communist ideals. A historical materialist analysis of 1381 underpinned John's understanding of Ball as he was aware that Ball was a figure ahead of his time whose ideals were not ready to come to fruition in feudal England. While Ball's sentiments were "beautiful", they were "no more than ideal dreams". Nevertheless, "this prophetic forerunner among communistic agitators should be held in grateful memory by the British labouring masses."¹

Morris's presentation of Ball was regularly and enthusiastically embraced among the first generation of CPGB members. Certainly, Morris could be used for straightforward polemical purposes. *The Communist*, for instance, interpreted a mention of "foul swine" in *A Dream of John Ball* to refer to "all the Allied nations whose people were to bask in the rays of a new dawn after the war" but which had instead become "homes of



▲ Peasant longbowmen at practice, from the *Luttrell Psalter*, c. 1320–1340

starvation".² But Morris's historical materialism was consistently part of the attraction. In 1934 (the centenary of Morris's birth), Robin Page Arnot would take the same reference to the "foul swine" to attack the Tories, as "representative of the capitalist class", and their appropriation of Morris. But Arnot did not just attack the "bourgeois myth" which ignored Morris's socialism; he also critiqued the "Labour-ILP myth" which downplayed Morris's Marxism and ideas about class antagonism. Only "those so blind", Arnot argued, could not "see the results of a study of Marx in John Ball", a text which should be understood for what it really was: a dialectical reading of English history and a revolutionary call to the workers. Indeed, Arnot went further still and claimed that *A Dream of John Ball* can be summarised by the opening words of the *Communist Manifesto*: "the history of all human society, past and present, has been the history of class struggles."³

Popular Front and the Pageants

The end of the 1930s began the most influential Communist presentations of Ball in face of the rising fascist threat. Fascism was seen as imperialism at its most reactionary, and a hindrance to the transformation to socialism. Thus, the Popular Front line of the late 1930s looked to the development of national anti-fascist resistance with rediscovered progressive national traditions – to counter fascist and English nationalist demagoguery – to be connected with international struggles and infused with socialist ideas, though they were also to be presented in a non-sectarian manner and in ways that would appeal more broadly outside Party circles. Now the legacy of 1381 was less about emphasising why the uprising failed and more about how the ideals of the uprising were part of an ongoing English or British tradition which pointed to a socialist future.

Ball and the 1381 uprising became integral to this era of CPGB propaganda, in historical pageants, folk music, popular history, theatrical performance, and poetry. Among the pageants, the most famous was the popular "March of History" (20 September 1936) which culminated in Hyde Park.⁴ According to the report in the *Daily Worker*, the 1381 uprising inaugurated a history of "people who have always known when to revolt against tyranny and will always know in the future"; while accompanying



▲ Jean Froissart's depiction of William Walworth killing Wat Tyler; the King is represented twice, watching events unfold (left) and addressing the crowd (right). British Library, London.

banners were dedicated to the various heroes from English history, and promoted the Communist Party in its fight “for peace and socialism and a merry England.”⁵ While there was a festive atmosphere, the culmination of the “March of History” focused on the struggles of the present, as the Hyde Park procession culminated with the Red Flag, the Spanish Republican flag, and a portrait of the Communist Felicia Browne who had died in Spain. Browne’s martyrdom and the history of martyrs were, as one historian put it, a “necessary element in that long historical struggle towards arriving at the final liberating goal of freedom from tyranny, whether feudal, Victorian capitalist, or fascist.”⁶

The writer Jack Lindsay (1900–1990), an immigrant from Australia, developed literary ideas about Ball in relation to pageantry and (largely) England’s revolutionary traditions. It is unclear when Lindsay became a member of the Communist Party (probably in 1941), but by the late 1930s he was, if not a member, then certainly sympathetic. Incensed by a comment in the *Times Literary Supplement* that Communists could not really understand “the nature of the English people”, Lindsay wrote a long dramatic poem, *Not English?* (1936) – soon changed to *Who Are the English?* – which was performed as a mass declamation at Unity Theatre.⁷ The poem provided a history of popular leaders and movements that the ruling class had tried to silence and tried to classify as un-English, starting with Ball and moving through a radical and revolutionary history to the working class of the

present and calls for a Socialist or Soviet Republic of England.⁸

Against the backdrop of the Second World War, Lindsay developed these ideas further in his historical work, *England, My England: A Pageant of the English People* (1939), which he claimed sold 80,000 copies and “had a strong effect in the factories”.⁹ Lindsay’s literary pageant told the story of the historic struggle between two Englands: the England of the workers and the England of the rich landowner and ruling class – although his “England” did include nineteenth and twentieth century working-class struggles in Wales and Scotland. For Lindsay, the Communist Party was the latest example of the “England” of the workers as it represented the “real tradition of the working class of England, with renewed scientific insight.” But this “England” was now threatened in an era of imperialism, “an increasing encroachment of the police-state”, and an “English type of Fascism” enabled by capitalism to “smash the free trade unions”. As Lindsay’s vision was internationalist, the struggles of the Soviet Union and in Spain provided valuable lessons and showed how in Britain the state could be used in cooperation with trade unions to protect and promote its “solidly persisting communist tradition.” After all, as Lindsay finished with a flourish, “Communism is English.”¹⁰ (He seems to have had a blind spot regarding the peoples of Scotland and Wales and may have been unduly worried about Scottish and Welsh nationalisms.)

Ball effectively began this communist tradition and led a “grand united protest of Englishmen against the feudal lords” and for a world where classes must be “altogether abolished”. Ball was murdered by the defenders of private property but faced his accusers with “all the courage of a great revolutionary” in the “true English tradition” which was then carried on for centuries. Lindsay, of course, was writing about Ball with one eye firmly on the twentieth century. The heirs of the murderers of Ball were now “condemning millions to the dark misery of unemployment, piling up fortunes out of rearmament-programmes, aiding Fascism here and elsewhere, hurling the world once more toward the shambles of war.” This left a straightforward choice: stand with Ball’s England of defiant freedom and the workers or stand with those who would have watched Ball’s gruesome death.¹¹

Popular Front and the Historians

The formation of the Left Book Club (LBC) in 1936 had helped the popularisation of English radical history. The most famous example was AL Morton’s *A People’s History of England* (1938) which was the LBC’s monthly choice for May 1938 and distributed to 40,000 members.¹² Morton naturally included Ball and placed the 1381 uprising into a wider explanation of the transformation from feudalism to capitalism. But the title page also carried a quotation from *A Dream of John Ball* which looked to the hope of a great future transformation (“Ill would Change be at Whiles, were it not for the Change beyond the Change”).

A similar but more focused LBC treatment of the 1381 uprising was *Nine Days that Shook England* (1938) by Hymie Fagan, a CPGB activist brought up in the Jewish East End.¹³ For all his detailed analysis of medieval England, Fagan constantly made comparisons with the twentieth century, including references to the Russian Revolution, Bolsheviks, vanguardism, British Communists, fascism, Hitler, Franco, Spanish Civil War, the General Strike, mass unemployment, and monopoly capitalism. Indeed, Fagan’s title echoes John Reed’s famous account of the 1917 revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919). Fagan even compared Tyler with Harry Pollitt and William Gallagher and Ball with Tom Mann and Lenin. Ball and Mann (of whom Ball would have been “rightly proud”) were, Fagan pointed out, framed by the authorities, arrested under similar laws, answered their persecutors, and were active in similar economic crises.¹⁴ Fagan’s book is unusual in the reception history of Ball and 1381, in that it discusses the malicious treatment of Jews in medieval Europe, adding an ominous comment that the only reason there were no pogroms in England was because Jews had been expelled under Edward I.¹⁵ No doubt readers, familiar with recent events in Cable Street, would have picked up on the contemporary relevance of this history.

The influence of Fagan and especially Morton, as well as ‘Popular Front’ readings of English history, can be seen in the work of the Communist Party Historians’ Group (CPHG, 1946-56), which featured some of the most celebrated British historians (eg Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and EP Thompson). Different historians would become associated with different periods of English history as part of an overarching agenda to explain the transition from feudalism to capitalism, but 1381 was again an important reference point. Dona Torr, a major influence on the CPHG, stressed the significance of the “seditious priest John Ball” at the beginning of the “English revolutionary tradition” which continued in the twentieth century through people like Mann.¹⁶ Rodney Hilton became most associated with the study of 1381 and feudal England, where he made detailed arguments about how the landlord-tenant relationship was the motor of historical change, and how resistance and demands for freedoms and liberties led to the

freeing up of peasants and artisans for a new type of economic relationship to emerge in agrarian capitalism, which would morph into industrial capitalism. Hilton and Fagan co-published *The English Rising of 1381* (1950) and Hilton was able to develop the ideas that would later mark his long and distinguished career. While Fagan focused on the narrative of the revolt, Hilton concentrated on providing a historical materialist analysis, examining the “superstructure of ideas and institutions which had evolved from the mode of production in this society” and the antagonisms involved in the landlord-peasant relationship which gave rise to the transition from feudalism to capitalism.¹⁷ For all his technical expertise, Hilton never lost sight of the importance of popular history and, as he and Fagan put it, presenting “to the British people one part of their own tradition of struggle for popular liberties” which carried on through the English Revolution and the modern working-class movement.¹⁸

Ball during the Cold War

Popular socialist interest in Ball and the 1381 uprising went into steady decline after the Second World War. Nevertheless, Arnot continued and updated his defence of the Marxist legacy of Morris and A Dream of John Ball; while Jackson regularly wrote about the significance of Ball (and Morris) in the *Daily Worker*.¹⁹ The *Daily Worker* (followed by the *Morning Star*) became especially important in keeping memory of 1381 alive, including discussions of Ball in the context of Robin Hood stories and how primitive communism was remembered in English radical movements.²⁰ Andrew Rothstein noted that the location of the Marx Memorial Library at Clerkenwell Green was the same area where “the rebel peasants of East Anglia in 1381, led by Jack Straw and John Ball, burned St John’s Priory.”²¹ Hilton gave another spin on the historical materialist reading of Ball as part of a *Daily Worker* series on the Queen’s coronation, explaining the reasons why monarchy was a lingering relic of feudalism.²²

But the major historic influence on the ongoing reception of Ball was the Cold War. This can be seen in the story of the work of Charles Poulsen (1911–2001). Hailing from the Jewish East End, Poulsen was a cab driver and wartime firefighter, as well as a Young Communist League and CPGB member. Following an argument with a fellow firefighter about English history, popular democracy, and violent revolution, Poulsen wrote *English Episode* (1946) which was reworked as a play, *The Word of a King*, for Unity Theatre (1951), as part of Unity’s interest in a homegrown radicalism.²³ In many ways, Poulsen’s work was a standard interpretation of Ball and 1381, but what was distinctive was how the play was framed. In the *Daily Worker*, Barbara Niven suggested that part of the aim of *The Word of a King* and Unity was to “go deep under Yankee skins” and be “equally painful to Yankee yes-men of this country.” For Niven, Poulsen’s play and figures like Ball belonged to the fight to “maintain our progressive cultural tradition these days” which also meant supporting the *Daily Worker* for it “alone among British newspapers ... defends national independence and fights back with facts and comment against the poison of Yankee ‘culture’.”²⁴ “The USA threat to British culture” was the title of a conference held on 29 April 1951, under the auspices of the CPGB’s National Cultural Commission, the proceedings being published in a special issue of *Arena*, edited by Jack Lindsay.²⁵

The impact of the Cold War was perhaps most pronounced in *Wat Tyler*, an opera by CPGB member Alan Bush (1900-95), with the libretto written by his wife Nancy Bush (1905-91). Alan Bush had been involved in pageants and popular presentations of folk and classical music in the late 1930s, and one of the sources for *Wat Tyler* was Fagan’s *Nine Days*.²⁶ As we might

expect, then, the Bushes' presentation of Ball and 1381 was conventional among socialist presentations that preceded them. But, once again, the new post-war context is what added something distinctive. The first performances of the opera were not in Britain but in the German Democratic Republic (GDR): it was first broadcast on Berlin Radio (1952) and first staged in Leipzig (1953), followed by performances in Rostock (1955) and Magdeburg (1959), where the populist story of Tyler and Ball may be understood in the context of post-fascist rebuilding in the GDR.²⁷ In Britain, despite Alan Bush's reputation, it was largely ignored. Certainly, there was a BBC broadcast in December 1956, but it was not performed on stage until 1974, and this was thanks to a Workers' Music Association performance which, unsurprisingly, still went largely unnoticed.²⁸ The obvious explanation for this is, of course, the Bushes' association between Ball and the Soviet Union and GDR. Though not without later praise, producers and critics distanced themselves from or attacked *Wat Tyler* while Alan Bush defended Nancy against charges of propaganda, arguing that if there was a propagandistic purpose it was to "celebrate in operatic form one of the many episodes in history in which English men and women fought for freedom against oppression."²⁹

End of an Era

The 600th anniversary of the revolt in 1981 provided another important moment in the ongoing reception of Ball. Morton wrote a pamphlet on the subject published by the CPGB, while his fellow CPHG alumnus Hilton published popular articles.³⁰ Both maintained their interest in historical materialist approaches to the revolt – half of Morton's pamphlet referenced the role of the peasant in feudal society, conflict over wages, extraction of surplus, and the place of Ball and the revolt in the longer-term transformation from feudalism to capitalism and the growth of a new form of exploitation. But 1981 also marks the end of an era of such readings of the revolt. More romanticised readings were becoming dominant on the left where the historical materialist readings were being overlooked or just forgotten. Occasionally, there were attacks on readings associated with people like Hilton or Morton. In a Socialist Workers' Party pamphlet (based on a lecture) from 1981, Paul Foot criticised a tendency that features "perhaps especially" among Marxists "who think about history" in order to:

"divide it into sealed compartments ... say that the peasant comes from a different age, is separate from us, has nothing to do with us, and that history moves by stages, scientific stages, and the peasant is one stage, and the workers are in another ... nothing therefore to do with us what happened six hundred years ago, in a quite different sort of economy. We can leave it on one side. We're not peasants, we're very advanced people, we've been an industrial working class burrowing away for years and we've got pretty well nowhere, but we're terribly important and we're much more important than any peasant."³¹

Foot saw this thinking as "reactionary", "wrong", "insulting" and even "paralysing" because of the idea that history determines and "paralyses" the possibility of human action. Instead, he preferred to stress the similarities in class struggle between then and now.

If Foot had people like Morton and Hilton in mind, then this was an unfair reading. But more significantly, what Foot's presentation represents is a concern for the old English radical tradition minus the historical materialism associated with Hilton, Morton, and others. Foot's reading points to the dominant narrative on the left ever since. But this ongoing narrative has

typically seen Ball as a promoter of rights, democracy, and vague notions of egalitarianism which means it typically has to downplay the oddities of a violent medieval uprising.³² This should be no surprise because it is difficult, for instance, to use the beheading an archbishop as an example to promote socialism or radicalism today. The advantage of the historical materialist reading, however, is that it takes both historical difference and continuity seriously and helps us understand how and why capitalism has become dominant and what are the seeds of its undoing. It is now the task of a new generation to bring this reading back.

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GRAHAM STEVENSON FRED THOMPSON, THE TGV PARTY AND THE MINORITY



TGWU, THE COMMUNIST MOVEMENT

The Transport & General Workers Union (TGWU) was founded in 1922. In its early years, the leading Communist inside the union was Fred Thompson, who practically carried the Party's flag single-handedly.

Fred was born just that – Fred – and known even to the media of his day as that. The only time he was called Frederick was when the constabulary charged him. He was from a large working-class family, but an attempt to find his birth in the archives has not so far succeeded in disentangling the large number of namesakes. The introduction of elementary education up to the age of thirteen in 1870 was an important step but it was neither compulsory nor free from cost. This had a knock-on effect on the accuracy of birth dates and there was still resistance from working people to 'busybodies' knowing their family affairs. As we shall see later, his origins are likely to relate to the water transport industry in the north-west of England.

He would have been in his early 30s when, in 1920, he was a founder member of the Communist Party. From the year previous, he was London District Secretary of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers' Union (DWRGLU), familiarly known as the Dockers' Union, which took part in the merger that formed the TGWU. He continued in this role as the key officer leading at least a dozen paid officials wholly concerned with the TGWU Docks Trade Group. Thompson was at the height of his powers and was noted for his charisma and power as a public speaker. His lineage and experience in the world of work had clearly marked him out as a natural leader.

The Jolly George

Thompson is often closely associated with Harry Pollitt, later the Communist Party's long-term general secretary, in accounts of the refusal of dockers to load munitions on to the ship, the *Jolly George*, which was to be bound for Poland's fight against Soviet Russia in 1920. Although Pollitt was personally generous enough to confirm that nothing Thompson did in that regard had not been approved by his line manager, Ernest Bevin, the action would not have taken place without the support of the union's London District Committee, to which Thompson was key.

Bevin, as National Organiser of the Dockers' Union, was cautious enough to recognise that his own credentials for advancement as a union leader were much more administratively based than Thompson's, who was the undisputed authoritative leader of all London dockers and more, as the Dockers' Union rapidly became the main general union not just for dockworkers in London but all other trades

in and around port districts, spreading to Bristol, Cardiff, and other ports in the south.

In 1932, Thompson would write for the *Daily Worker* his article, 'How we stopped the *Jolly George*',¹ which was expanded into a Seamen's Minority Movement cyclostyled pamphlet used especially for the Port of Le Havre. He explained how the British government had turned to Poland as "the best instrument for continuing the attack and preventing the restoration of the economic life of the USSR". Tens of millions of French and British money and thousands of tons of munitions were thrown into Poland. Munitions of all kinds were shipped to Poland with "the tacit consent of the British Government ... at first shipped surreptitiously, and in small quantities". When it became apparent that the official trade union movement would do nothing, "these shipments grew in volume and preparations were made to send full cargoes".

But the London District Committee of the Dockers' Union decided to take every action to prevent the transport of munitions to Poland. This was put to the union's Executive, but

"as it failed to find endorsement, the London dockers decided to act on their own. Every dock and wharf in London were scoured for munitions, and action was centred on the *SS Jolly George*, then loading a full freight of munitions in the East India Dock".

Laconically, Thompson observed:

"It was necessary to use judgment and to render the ship unseaworthy before taking action. This was done by putting such a list on the ship that it would have been unsafe to move her, even in dock."

This meant that many dockers, perhaps 50-100, physically manhandled crates of heavy boxes from one side of the ship to the other, tilting the angle of list to such a degree that it would threaten to heel over and capsize in the water. Righting a large vessel such as the *George* was a job for salvage crews and maritime law, and insurance inhibited scabbing actions. The dockers had effected the list to prevent the company union, or 'yellow' seamen's union (of which more later) from manning the ship and running it to the Baltic.

Every docker on that ship and on the entire quay then ceased work at an agreed time, an electrifying action "changing the whole war situation". Newspapers wrote of a fait accompli and "suddenly discovered the immorality of

supplying munitions for use against a country with whom we were not officially at war". The "warmonger Churchill", did not surrender so easily and Thompson's District Office was "besieged by phone messages and threats of Government action". The threat to "flood the London docks with troops" was met with Thompson advising Churchill that "if a single soldier was put into the docks every docker in the port would cease work, he soon cooled down, only finding his voice again when told some facts of his family history", a docker's way of saying he had called the politician a bastard!

The Waldorf-Astor dynasty owned the *Jolly George* and then tried "threats, then persuasion, and finally, pleading", agreeing the munitions be put ashore at Greenhithe, near Dartford, where they rotted for two years on the shore front before being taken for scrap. Thompson extracted from the magnates, as a condition of their ships being worked in the Port of London, an undertaking never to carry any form of munitions in the future.

Thompson's Rise

As a representative of the London dockers, Thompson played a leading role at the Dockers' Union Triennial Delegate Meeting in Plymouth 18-22 May 1920, where he pledged opposition to war promoted by "autocracies, Junkers, capitalists". Supported by the delegate from Swansea, he also proposed that two delegates from the union be sent to the Leeds Convention of 3 June, which had been called by the United Socialist Council for the purposes of forming a single Communist Party.²

The DWRGLU was the largest of the unions which came together in 1922 to form the TGWU and was by then composed of more general workers than most other unions. At the time it was headed by long-term dockers' leader Ben Tillett (1860-1943), who had held the post of general secretary for three decades. With his gigantic reputation as a hero of the 1889 strike, he was nominated for both general secretary and president of the new union, but declined both roles "with a view to harmonising all the conflicting interests".³ He may perhaps have been conscious of his age – he had turned 61 during the last stages of the merger talks – as well as his known weakness in administration.

The astute Bevin, who was elected general secretary, and who like Tillett was a Bristolian, must have offered his former leader advance consolation, much as he did with leaders of other merging unions, since after the merger Tillett was granted the pleasant post of international and political secretary, involving lots of foreign travel and time in the Palace of Westminster. He held the post until 1931, and retained his seat on the General Council of the Trades Union Congress until 1932, when he was 72 years of age.

Four leaders contested the largely ceremonial role of president, which needed good chairmanship skills – warmth and tact – not Tillett's best assets, but something Harry Gosling was widely thought to possess. Seven leaders contested the then relatively significant function of financial secretary, which not only provided access to strike funds but also gave more than enough scope for patronage over bids for places in the sun.

Thompson, a member of the British Socialist Party well before 1920, had been the sole serious contender against Bevin for the TGWU general secretaryship. Although his vote was small in comparison to Bevin's, he had been a respected and able candidate. The outcome of the fact that, one by one, an astonishing 24 other potential candidates withdrew in favour of the eventual winner, was that a landslide effect was

both predicted and created. A third candidate, G Porter, hardly made a dent.

It is likely that Thompson had been a member of James Sexton's National Union of Dock Labourers (NUDL) before becoming prominent in the DWRGLU. There was certainly a branch secretary of East Hull's NUDL named F Thompson.⁴ Although formed in Glasgow in 1889, the NUDL quickly moved its headquarters to Liverpool, reflecting the relatively strong support it had in northern England. Hull was certainly more a kindred spirit for Lancashire dockers than anywhere else. The union had been renamed the National Union of Dock, Riverside and General Workers in Great Britain and Ireland by the time it joined the TGWU during the second tranche of mergers late in 1922, although its quirky membership had originally voted not to join.⁵

The circumstances suggest it likely that Thompson was already a seasoned veteran of union struggle and had possibly had to leave the Port of Liverpool, or its environs, for Hull after 1911 and then found it hard to get work during the imperialist war from 1914. He was certainly working at Grays Port, Thurrock, in 1915, when he was a Dockers' Union delegate to the TUC and formally seconded a motion moved by Bevin calling for a dedicated Minister of Labour.⁶ This seems a rapid promotion, unless there was prior experience, although the port was temporarily significant during the First World War, when Tilbury Fort was brought into action serving Flanders. Grays wharves were also home to the largest fleet of sailing barges ever recorded, that of EJ & W Goldsmith.⁷ Goldsmith's vessels traded on the south and east coast as far as Yorkshire, which could have prompted a move from Hull to the south.

To return to the circumstances of his background, Thompson's age, as often stated by newspapers, suggests his being born in 1878. There are four available ten-yearly censuses to check for a Fred Thompson (including Frederick) born around that year. The only one that surfaces is in the 1891 census, of a Fred Thompson, birthplace not provided, birth date 1876, then living at Fifty-Four Acre Huts, Ellesmere Port, Whitby, Wirral, Cheshire. The village of Whitby was connected by Dock Street to the port, and this was very near the port. John Thompson, the 36-year old father of the family, is described as a "canal ganger", the foreman of a gang of labourers. Supplying the census-taker with a birth date two years before 1878, our subject's oft-mentioned year of birth, would have made him comfortably away from the just under 13 years of age that he probably was. A big man in later life, he would have looked older than his age in a period when many working-class kids were thin and scrawny. Surely, his father or his uncle would have had him already digging earth for the new waterway connections in Ellesmere Port?

On the census record, five siblings, Fred's parents, a cousin and an uncle who is also a ganger are accompanied by three lodgers, each of whom is described as being a "navy". Almost certainly, this little community was part of a large workforce, almost 17,000 at its height, associated with one of the most ambitious projects of the time, to link Manchester directly with the sea. The never-completed Ellesmere Canal was part of an 18th century project to connect the Mersey, the Severn, and the Dee rivers. Work on the Manchester Ship Canal, built to avoid the excessive charges of the Port of Liverpool, began in 1887 and finished only in time to permit a grand opening on 1 January 1894. The Ship Canal links to the Shropshire Grand Union Canal at Ellesmere Port, where the ganger Thompsons would have been key personnel in the massive project, the last of the great navigations. We don't know what Fred Thompson's relationship with his father was,

and we can't be sure John Thompson, ganger born in 1855, was that man. But, during the project's life, the labour explosions of 1889, especially in the Port of London, demonstrated that labourers could unionise and effectively so.

The Navvies', Bricklayers', Labourers and General Workers' Union was founded that autumn, probably on the Manchester Ship Canal (where the long-term general secretary had 'flung muck' into wagons), with possible links to London. The union was seemingly uncompromising, its motto showing astonishing class consciousness: "Union – no dogs or blacklegs need apply". The union also revealed a smattering of the understanding of the labour theory of value, though none of this was to last!

Thompson's rise in the Dockers' Union was clearly meteoric. In 1917, he had been called upon at the TUC to second a motion on state education.⁸ Thus, his appointment as a full-time officer of the union in 1919 was only after serving a five year 'apprenticeship' in a southern port. For the next seven years, the press hung on to his every word. His very first headline-grabbing statements had the Port of London and the Government's Food Controller as complicit and guilty of wastefulness in the handling of food: "I have seen tons of grain and pulse-food left down the holds of barges, and grass growing on it."⁹ Coal had been allowed to drop on 30 tons of wheat in the hold of the *War Vulture* at Victoria Docks.

The Dockers' Union appointed Thompson to the state-sponsored Chocolate Sub-Committee, set up to inquire into allegations of monopoly price fixing against the Manufacturing Confectioners' Alliance. Cocoa bean imports were historically important to the port of Bristol and perhaps manufacturers expected union concern to maintain a lucrative trade. In the end, Thompson found himself in favour of the consumer and not at all in agreement with any of the other four panel members over the margin of gross profit obtained on loose retailed weight.¹⁰

On 15 February 1920, Ernest Bevin, as Dockers' Union National Organiser, reported to members on the Court of Inquiry into "Wages, Rates and Conditions of Men Engaged in Dock and Waterside Labour", chaired by Lord Shaw of Dunfermline, otherwise known as The Shaw Inquiry. Thompson arranged a mass meeting of London dockers at the Public Hall, Barking Road, Canning Town and chaired the meeting as District Secretary.¹¹

The Shaw Inquiry recommended a 44-hour guaranteed week, an end to casualisation, and sixteen shillings a day for dockers on time work, which would have been a fine wage if all six days could have been worked. However, little of this was implemented, due to the intransigence of the employers and the refusal of politicians to curb their excesses, so pay hovered around ten shillings a day for a long time, with the number of days being highly variable. That summer of the Inquiry, Thompson led a party of councillors, to show the Minister of Labour the circumstances of dock labour across wharves in Wapping and Shadwell.¹² "Streams" of men were being seen turned away after failing to get even a half day's work at the 8 am 'call'.

Internationalism

Thompson chaired the first conference of 650 delegates that founded the British Section of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) on 15 October 1921. Commonly known as the Profintern, this international body was established by the Communist International and operated until 1937, largely with the purpose of creating 'red' unions where there was a failure of the social-democrat led international union movement to

provide any kind of solidarity or struggle. Although 'Left' Communists took the notion of red unions to mean that new unions would be created to replace the old, Harry Pollitt, as secretary of the British RILU Section (BRILU), reported that they were "not going to doing anything dramatic". They were working with the objective of compelling British trade unionists to "broaden" their outlook.

Fred Thompson, in moving a resolution on solidarity at the BRILU, had had personal experience of the failure of social-democratic solidarity, in particular over the handling of coal in ports and docks. On 15 April 1921 ('Black Friday'), the executive of the Transport Workers' Federation (TWF), which like the Dockers' Union was affiliated to the Amsterdam-based International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU, disfavoured by the Comintern), had refused to engage in solidarity action with the British miners in their struggle to maintain pay and conditions. That the secretary of the TWF, Robert Williams, was expelled from the British CP for going along with this, would further seem to explain the position London dockers now took, under Thompson's guidance, to favour disaffiliation from the IFTU.

Tillett, as a major figure in the IFTU, was incensed at this; but Bevin was cooler in his thinking, being more than aware that Thompson, as a mass leader with a base in the ports of the north-east, the north-west and London, with strong left-wing credentials that matched the prevailing mood in the early 1920s, could be a thorn in his side. Thompson had given fair warning in his election address: "My candidature is a challenge to autocracy and a protest against the building up of a new Union around individuals instead of policy."¹³

Thompson gave no sign of accommodating himself to life in the new bureaucracy. He chaired the London District Conference of the BRILU shortly after the 1922 TUC. Harry Pollitt may have been at the front rank of Communist leadership and, in coming up to 32 years of age, was at that time the Party's lead trade unionist, but he had a long way to go to achieve the pre-eminence he would later gain. Thompson was probably the most senior of Communist trade unionists at this point.

Arguably, the experience of the next decade would be the making of Pollitt, as it was the breaking of Thompson. Very many Communists were still dual members of the Labour Party. Intriguingly, Frank Smith, the BRILU's London secretary, said at the 1922 conference – even after the 'Black Friday' climbdown – that the aim of the BRILU was "to strengthen official leaders of the trade union movement". On the other hand Nat Watkins, for the RILU British Bureau, spoke of "revolutionising the existing Labour organisation (by which he meant trade unions as well as the Labour Party) by continual permeation".¹⁴ The last time such a term had been used in British politics was a quarter of a century before, when Sidney and Beatrice Webb employed the tactic as Fabians to push through mildly social-democratic policies, by convincing persons of influence of the merits of the argument, irrespective of their political affiliations. British 'reds', as the press termed them, did not have the notion later called 'entryism', advocated by Leon Trotsky when, in 1934, he proposed that the French Trotskyists dissolve their organisation to enter the social-democratic parties to connect and convert left currents. The BRILU seems to have been aiming for what might later be termed a 'broad left' approach.

London dockers had closer links to Rotterdam, where the RILU had a bureau, than they did Hamburg, which was much more in tune with the thinking in Moscow. This had significant connections to what came next, that the left in Britain's docks

began thinking that the RILU, or some hybrid version of it, might have more practical effect in international solidarity between ports via the International Transport Workers Federation (always rendered ITF since in many of its now official eight languages ‘transport workers’ is a single word). The ITF at the time was based in Amsterdam, under the leadership of Edo Fimmen (1881-1942), who offered a much more congenial ‘broad left’ perspective than the IFTU. A friend of Comintern functionary Willi Münzenberg, and a member of various bodies such as the International Red Aid and the League Against Imperialism, Fimmen strongly advocated the use of boycott and embargo tactics in international solidarity.

Organising in the docks

Back in the TGWU, at least in the Docks Trade Group, many thought Thompson should have been appointed the first Regional Secretary for Area One, London and South-East England. However, Bevin preferred to keep him strictly corralled in his base, the Port of London – both a cunning thing to do but also arguably very risky and certainly at the root of serious tensions in the new union for the next four years. Thus, early in 1922, Thompson was appointed secretary of the London Docks Regional Trade Group, arguably a fatal position for the relationship between the two men. Said to be a natural leader, with a powerful speaking voice, important in an age when amplified voices were rare, especially on a wharf, it might in fact have been more constructive for the union, if not for Bevin personally, had Thompson not been restricted to the ports.

Now focused on expanding the empire allotted to him, Thompson was becoming something of a draw. He and his dozen full-time officers began organising every small port, wharf and jetty within Area One’s coastline, which they scoured for opportunity. A new branch for Folkestone Harbour opened up its second-ever meeting to all local trade unionists, to plan support for a visit by Thompson (whom the local paper even described as an “able speaker”) to address two open-air meetings near the harbour.¹⁵

Bevin’s only response to the threat Thompson increasingly displayed was to concentrate more and more power in his own hands, laying the basis for tight administrative control based on the domination of lay committees by paid officers. Such a culture was at odds with the tradition of the Dockers’ Union, but it would beset the TGWU for more than 40 years. In the process, a culture of patronage would develop, ensuring that lay committees were increasingly populated by those awaiting a paid officer’s position or accepting that paid time off work to engage in extensive union activities was the most they would achieve. Plaudits for long service at senior lay level would accompany such roles.

Meanwhile, Thompson focused on trying to win more job permanency for dockers, who along with water and road transport workers were at the heart of the new union, with goods transport almost totally focused on the ports that he knew so well. Whilst work to buttress support this was carried out, an unofficial national dock strike simply broke out in July 1923 when over 50,000 dockers walked out, hostile to Bevin’s signing of an agreement accepting new, lower rates of pay. The reduction from 8 shillings to 5s 6d for a four-hour minimum employment period represented a cut of almost a third.¹⁶

Whilst the TGWU was dominant outside London, the lightermen and the stevedores had their own union in the Port of London. RILU supporters urged that all talk of splits be put aside in favour of unity to win the strike. Bevin ordered a



return to work on the grounds that an agreement must be honoured, clamouring that the very existence of the TGWU was under threat. Thompson supported Bevin and so was, for once, at odds with Pollitt. The latter’s friend and first biographer, John Mahon, believed that Thompson had “inside information on the intention to form a new union”.¹⁷ That may have been true but, as we will see, it was the maintenance of a multi-union national bargaining framework that Thompson prized.

Action began in Hull on 2 July but soon spread across the UK, lasting until 30 July. The strike was solid until half-way through, when it began to weaken outside London. By the end of the dispute, thousands of dockers had left the TGWU to join the Amalgamated Stevedores’ Labour Protection League, which renamed itself the National Amalgamated Stevedores, Lightermen, Watermen and Dockers but was always known as the ‘Blue Union’.

Bevin had, nonetheless, signed an agreement as general secretary, to which he had been elected by a landslide. Moreover, he had assigned for himself the national secretaryship (often seen as a kind of general secretaryship for trades groups) of the Docks Group. Most of the permanently employed had taken the cautious line and went back, but casual workers, perhaps with most to gain and least to lose, rejected the idea. To maintain unity, despite being furious with Bevin, Thompson made a last-ditch attempt to persuade those who still held out to resume work.¹⁸ His aim was to ensure that the rank-and-file strike committee retained some credibility.

But no doubt sensing that Bevin was ready to disown his members, the employers’ representative, Mr G Grinling-Harris, national secretary of the National Council of Port Labour Employers, insisted that if there was anything to discuss “we shall do it with Mr Bevin or Mr Gosling But there is nothing to discuss. We have an agreement and that is sufficient.” It had been Thompson who had crafted the port shop stewards’ committee as a representative force of dockers, focused on local bargaining achieving the highest results and thus having national impetus. But Bevin imposed the idea

that the union side of the National Joint Council was the body that would determine all – and Thompson was a single but lone voice on that group.

The difference between the two men was one of strategy – but what a strategic gap! Bevin's version was defensive, having bargaining unity at a national level so that the weakest was dragged up by the strongest just a little, while being constrained from reaching the heights being reached by most. Thompson's instinct was more defiant – for the strongest not to be weakened by the bottom of the pile but, rather, to drag the weak up to the level of the strong.

Yet Sylvia Pankhurst's *Workers' Dreadnought* unhelpfully spread the claim that Thompson and Fred Potter, the deputy secretary of the London Docks Regional Trade Group, had sold out the dockers.¹⁹ Such mischievousness was grist to the mill, as Pankhurst's reputation of being someone difficult to get on with might well have been a view shared by Thompson, had Pollitt not repeatedly pointed out he had no trouble with her, if he was polite and friendly always.

Although the London strikers repudiated the strike committee led by Thompson and elected a new one, when Pollitt met with them he found the new committee dominated by stevedores and lightermen, unwilling to act in unity with other ports, and refusing help from Communists!¹⁸ By mid-August the strike had collapsed. There was certainly a lot of anger and disillusionment about and this laid the basis for dockers' disunity for decades. What became the Blue Union now began to operate very effectively as a general port workers' union, which it did just in London until the 1950s. Often a haven for Communists, who were not banned, the Blues sometimes consciously elected them as joint stewards, often just to spite the union's bureaucrats; although the process of history eventually obliged a merger with the TGWU not long after the bans were lifted.

The NASLWD systematically referred all major issues back to the membership for final decisions, a strong contrast to the officer-led approach that the TGWU was cementing as its own style. The General Council of the TUC immediately suspended the Blues, a decision rescinded four years later. It is, however, difficult to escape the conclusion that the experience now predisposed Thompson to readiness to form a new entity.

In 1924, Labour was able to form a government for the very first time, and an early action was to reactivate the wartime Supply and Transport Committee in the face of a revived dock strike against casual labour, just as it had declared a state of emergency over a strike by London bus and tram workers. The outcome of the dock strike was that a court of inquiry was set up, and the result was that it “came to an abrupt termination, because the case that had been put up, not in the precise form in which the men's demand was made, but in a very similar form, was granted as the result of that court of inquiry”.²⁰

Years later, Bevin told a Labour Party Conference:

“I know something about emergency powers. The first Labour Government rushed down to Windsor to get them signed to operate on me, and I have a vivid recollection of it, and we were only striking to restore a cut – not a very serious crime. I do not like emergency powers, not even when they are operated by my friends.”²¹

A representative of P&O Line and other shippers faced Bevin, Tillett, and Sexton in leading the talks. Officials from Hull, Liverpool, Glasgow and elsewhere sat with Thompson in watching Bevin's every move, giving guidance in adjournments.²² But negotiations failed and, unless Gosling

as Minister of Transport could get the employers somehow to settle, a strike for an increase in the day rate and a guaranteed week was on. Countering this, the employers offered a small increase and an inquiry in casualisation.²³

In the face of the first Labour government, operating in Parliament without a majority, and the TGWU's faith in the avuncular Gosling, the dispute was going nowhere, unless the dockers could break the resolve of the shipowners who dominated the ports industry. A mass meeting of dockers at Rotherhithe Hippodrome heard in absolute silence the recommendation from Fred Thompson to return to work. Then, after the shock subsided, many demanded the strike continue in support of a counter-demand for a 2s 6d advance, shouting, “Never mind the blacklegs”. They were perhaps thinking that Thompson was worried about the strike crumbling, but he genuinely strongly backed the recommendation on the basis that at least they had, most unusually, kept the employers together on a national basis; if there was one thing more than any other that had induced the Negotiating Committee to recommend a return it was that understanding. This produced the astonishing result that the meeting immediately switched and unanimously accepted the negotiated terms for a return of work. No-one else could have caused such a turn in the space of a single meeting, so great was the men's trust in Thompson.²⁴

After a period of negotiations, further threats emerged that an official strike would result unless it was accepted that at the very least the same rates of pay and conditions would be recognised by all employers operating in the Port of London.²⁵ The rate that should apply was highly contentious, with press speculation of a complete shut-down, until Thompson announced that negotiations between the Thameside cold storage employers and himself had resumed.²⁶ His tactical approach was now clear: making the employer, not the government, the key target seemed to be working.

Attempts to fix up-to-date piece rates for a range of cargoes were ongoing for several years and there were still outstanding issues to address in detail. Thompson therefore returned to this task and put forward a complete schedule of updated and consolidated rates, including old war bonuses, which the employers claimed to accept. But, completely unchecked by the state and the media, the stevedoring companies refused to implement the terms and kept undermining ‘understood’ rates adopted by ‘gentlemen's agreements’ by constantly introducing new rates and creating new names for products until the whole system was so complex it required an army of clerks to understand it.

Although the dockers had won a principle, nothing much came from it as the employers remained obdurate. Thompson began a tour of key ports to rouse opinion. At a mass meeting in Portsmouth market, he criticised both the press and the police, stating that the latter were “not carrying out their instructions for procedure in industrial disputes”, which was generally held to be complete non-interference.²⁷

In 1925, a mass meeting of TGWU members was held at the Elephant and Castle Theatre over these attempts by the union to end the system of casual labour, that members complained had seen no progress made since the previous summer. About 200 employees at Union Cold Storage at Thames Street depot had been on strike for ten days over victimisation arising from this. The TGWU's General Executive Council had unusually endorsed strike pay, which had been distributed on the Saturday. Thompson was reported as saying, “The men are determined win to through.” Picketing was “very effective” and he did not think that the employers were having much success engaging new staff.²⁸

The possibility of a revived national dock strike emerged once again from what were now 400 workers striking from the unloading of sheep and wool from Australasia for Messrs Scrutton's. Thompson was quoted as saying there was a danger of a dispute over piece rates spreading beyond King George V Dock. Each time a head of steam was reached, the employers backed off and sought to create internal conflict. The pressure continued, however; with local bargaining firmly in the hands of Thompson, and his rapport with the men's representatives being firm, the results were increasingly beneficial to the workers.

In April 1925, Thompson told the *Daily Herald* of his satisfaction that a dispute over piece rates lower than the norm, involving 1,100 dockers at the Royal Albert, King George and Tilbury docks was satisfactorily settled.²⁹ The day before, he had admitted that the dispute was unofficial but stated that "the men were justified in their action as every effort hitherto to get the matter put right had failed."³⁰ There is no sign that he was chastised by Bevin.

Breach with the TGWU

In August 1924 the Communist Party had made a serious turn towards industrial work with the formation of a kind of early 'broad left', the National Minority Movement (NMM) representing 200,000 workers. Party members Tom Mann and Harry Pollitt were elected president and general secretary respectively. With one or two exceptions the Executive of the NMM were all members of the Party. On 29/30 August 1925 the 2nd Annual Conference of the NMM took place, with 683 delegates, and Thompson chairing.³¹ At this time, NMM affiliation levels were approaching one million and the representativeness of the movement was pretty good, with influence spreading throughout the trade union movement. This permeation approach seemed preferable to splitting and some union leaders weren't too alarmed at the process of the NMM's incremental growing influence.

The Transport Minority Movement was the third biggest section but it covered the rail unions as well as the TGWU. It sent 76 delegates to the national NMM conference in 1925, 126 in March 1926 and 96 in August. TGWU members probably supplied around 50 solid contacts for the NMM, nearly all of them in either Passenger Services or Docks.³²

During the 1926 General Strike, Bevin committed the TGWU to an astonishing level of financial expenditure and could not be characterised as being wholly part of the TUC clique determined to destroy the strike from the start. However, after it was all over, he became increasingly administratively focused: the message coming to officers and through lay committees was to conserve the union's finances whilst they were rebuilt and that could take years. In the meantime, the approach was to be negotiating for a share in the benefits on the employers' ideas for 'scientific management', *ie* speed-up via new technology. Such a notion cut right across what dockers had been seeking since the Armistice – an end to casualisation of work. The strength and force of dockers' militancy in the intervening eight years had seemed to show that this was still achievable, no matter what else happened in the economy.

In 1926, a long-running disciplinary investigation by the union's executive into Thompson's deputy Fred Potter saw the latter suspended from work pending the outcome. This only finally emerged after the General Strike. In the circumstances, Thompson decided to establish a breakaway from the TGWU, by no means the first or the last but a clear departure for him. His and Potter's creation was the National Union of Transport

& Allied Workers, but this does not seem to have taken off at all, even in the London docks, after the TGWU poured resources and manpower in to rebut confidence in the move.³³ It is not at all clear that Thompson seriously entertained a break; maybe even the name was a way of preventing too much thought about the Blue Union?

The dismissal of a well-paid full time official, no matter how egregiously managed, was clearly not enough to move dockers, who had had little chance to enjoy full wages for some years. If permanent men, even, had been solid, if Thompson had been sacked, the move might have worked but, once again, Bevin had calculated the right time for the right move. It would not always come so easy to him.

Despite the unpleasant cynicism of Bevin's biographer, who retails gossipy slander about both Thompson and Potter, whilst claiming that the split was easily beaten off by the professionalism of a huge number of full-time officers despatched by Bevin's deputy during his absence on a foreign trip, the refusal to allow Thompson and his crew to speak to the Port of London men nearly backfired. During a tussle over who was accredited and who was not, 1,500 permanent dockers at Tilbury walked out, followed by another 600, when the employers refused to allow a TGWU official on site. The fact that it was Thompson pointing out that this breached the national agreement meant that the press in port towns were seriously perturbed at the possible consequences.³⁴

The quiet that followed is difficult to translate. It certainly has echoes of what Nina Fishman described as the tendency of CPers in the 1930s to be "constitutional militants", by which time the CP had acquired the astonishing number of about 50 full-time trade union functionaries in the London area alone.³⁵ This preferred left-wing stance in British trade unionism meant erring just in the side of not breaching union rules and regulations, so as not to be thrown out of mass organisations.

'Class Against Class'

Whilst, retrospectively, the TGWU bureaucracy was complacent and smug, it is probable that Thompson and Potter saw that, after three years of defeats, even with the lift that came from improved bargaining results, it was time for dockers to regroup. But it is more than likely that political guidance was at play. After the betrayal of the General Strike, the Communist Party shifted to a sharper criticism of the right wing in the labour movement, a position later strengthened by Comintern decisions in 1927 and 1928 calling for a New Line, later dubbed 'class against class'.

It is not clear what Thompson was doing in 1927, though he is likely to have been heavily engaged in appealing and complaining about events of the previous period. Towards the end of 1928, he seems to have been offered a new prospect, probably by Harry Pollitt or someone acting for him such as John Mahon. Matthew Worley, one of the more understanding of those several historians relying on CPG history as their mainstay, and in particular the new Comintern line, argues that Thompson was given a London Industrial Committee to develop "as an alternative to the London Trades Council" in 1929.³⁶ In fact, it is difficult to separate the work of the London Committee/Bureau of BRILU and the Minority Movement.

In September of that year, the seamen's union had been officially expelled from the Trades Union Congress, a dramatic step which now made it fair game for any union to poach and purloin membership from. At first, it seemed as if the TGWU would step in, but after the recalcitrant leader of the seamen died, the union also began to backtrack just as Thompson was upping his game.

In Moscow, the RILU leadership urged the creation of a new red union but the British CP was reluctant and hence caused the Seamen's Minority Movement (SMM) to be established in 1929 with Thompson as national organiser, suggesting that NUS members transfer to the TGWU. The idea was that bringing the strength of dockers to seafarers might encourage the TGWU to see that it could organise more than just coastal shipping. The TGWU was "a fighting union with fighting traditions," argued Pollitt.³⁷

The idea was for Thompson to focus on agitational point scoring from outside the TGWU, but not necessarily alienating it. Deciding to go to Tyneside, perhaps because the local Party district was by far the most supportive and loyal to the Comintern, especially its New Line, Thompson established himself in North Shields where most of the handful of the members and contacts of the SMM were based. In September a "large and attentive crowd" listened to him debate with a paid NUS organiser the failure of his union. Thompson said, not without foundation, that the union had been bought "lock, stock, and barrel" by the ship owners.³⁸

Back in London in February 1930, Thompson was arrested for causing an obstruction while holding a mass meeting of seamen outside the Connaught Road Shipping Office on Royal Victoria Dock. This was the headquarters of the powerful Shipping Federation offices, an employers' organisation for shipping firms, dedicated to maritime manpower issues. It was a particularly important voice in the running of the Port of London. Formed in response to the London dock strike of 1889 the main function of the Federation was to counter trade unionism and strike action.³⁹

In August of that year, he was arrested at the South Shields 'Labour Training Centre', when he attempted to hold an SMM public meeting without police permission.⁴⁰ In court, he was charged with obstruction.⁴¹ He was said to have defied a police inspector when told he could not hold a public open-air meeting without police permission. Thompson said he was going to exercise the right of free speech and refused to get off the box he was standing on, so the inspector pushed him off. Thomson refused to go away and said he would continue to object to the police preventing meetings being held.⁴²

Thompson was stopped by the chief constable of Sunderland himself whilst holding an open-air meeting in the summer of 1931.⁴³ A week later, he was arrested with two others, Alex 'Spike' Robson of North Shields, and Bill Masheder of Sunderland, for refusing to give up a street meeting. Since "trouble was brewing", they were each fined ten shillings.⁴⁴ This SMM meeting at The Shrubbery in Sunderland had seen Thompson and his two comrades taken to the police station by a procession of snatch squads, followed by hundreds of people while crowds lined the streets, at several points holding up traffic. A sequel at the police court shortly afterwards, saw Thompson, described as aged 53, living at Hyltop Street, North Shields.

Thompson's legendary voice and manner had clearly captivated Sunderland. Magistrates heard that the junctions of Athenaeum Street and Norfolk Street were completely obstructed. But the accused asserted that police evidence did not take account of the fact that their supporters had deliberately kept a free passage for pedestrians and that meetings had been held at that spot for over a century. The magistrates simply concluded that, if the police said it, "there must have been obstruction." Thompson declared in response to the court, "This is not a prosecution for obstruction, it is political persecution."⁴⁵

The Shrubbery, which had originally been put in place for

the benefit of the first residents of Fawcett Street, had become neglected and was purchased by Sunderland Corporation for the Town Hall and used to develop solicitors' and accountants' offices; but parts of the original open space had been left open and unused by the business district and were extensively used by the public. No doubt, it was less the public that complained to the police but those businesses with telephones able to contact the station discreetly. Today known as Sunnyside, The Shrubbery is still an open area in Sunderland's city centre.

In January 1930 rank-and-file committees were created by London dockers in response to yet more pay cuts, once again endorsed by the TGWU. The *Daily Worker* was supportive but, in the absence of Thompson, who was probably away on Seafarer MM business, Pollitt himself took a personal initiative, going down to the docks and finding a lighterman born in Manchester. After enthusiastic discussion, he came away with a list of popular demands. Although the strike was defeated, the CP won several recruits where it had none previously.⁴⁶

It seemed that Thompson was still admired as a mass leader. And he appears to have chosen an unusual route to promoting *The Red Leader*, a newspaper of the NMM. He was a key speaker at a conference of the London Newsvendors Provisional Committee of Action on Sunday 16 March 1930, from 3 pm at Friars Hall, Blackfriars. It was announced that "definite proposals of organisation" were to be put forward. Sid Elias of the National Unemployed Workers Movement and Jack Leekie of Workers International Relief also spoke,⁴⁷ suggesting that the conference was a means to apportion unemployed activists to the task on a commission basis, an approach which the *Daily Worker* would itself soon employ.

A meeting to prepare for the 5th World Conference of RILU was held in April 1930. Resolutions on the fight against capitalist rationalisation were submitted, with Pollitt, George Allison and Fred Thompson speaking.⁴⁸ Whatever Thompson's view about the New Line, he had won over two hundred new members of the MM in Cardiff and had set up ship committees in Barry and Swansea,

A Seamen's Minority Movement campaign in South Wales saw police not only preventing meetings being held "at the usual speaking places" but also threatening boarding house owners with the loss of their licences if they allowed MM meetings to be held at their establishments, whilst individual seafarers likely to be looking for a bed for the night were also warned off. Thompson was summonsed at Cardiff Police Court for speaking at "what has always been regarded as a public meeting place". Yet, "in the face of all this", 200 recruits had joined up, many probably being Yemeni seafarers, some of whom would soon end up permanently residing in Butetown.

The Metropolitan Police even banned a prize draw organised by London SMM after a police officer visited their headquarters. Thompson's letter to the Labour Home Secretary, Clynes, explained the innocence of their project and asked for his "observations on this new political attack".⁴⁹

At the global meeting of the RILU Central Council in November 1931, Pollitt sharply posed the argument for work inside reformist unions, explaining that successful NMM work could push reformist unions in the right direction.⁵⁰ Although his argument was not accepted at this session, it was clear that it had never been RILU policy to "advocate the general formation of 'red' unions in Britain".⁵¹

The NMM took the RILU line that a "class union" was needed in place of the NUS, implying a deep-water section of the TGWU's Waterways Trade Group. Bevin had been prepared to move in that direction, but the death of the former

NUS leader pre-empted it. Pollitt was not convinced that, without a mass base, a militant seafarers' union could succeed. In the end, although the RILU followed its Hamburg base in further promoting the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers, in Britain commitment to splitting the NUS faded, as it became willing to conform to the culture of Britain's single trade union centre. Even so, Pollitt needed a safe pair of hands to at least go through the motions of that commitment, sniping at the tail of the NUS in the hope it might be revived, a task that would take three decades more.

At the end of 1931, an assessment of the diversion of RILU's idea for an international red seamen's union saw Pollitt clash quite sharply with the Soviet head of RILU. Rank-and-file movements, led by Communists but involving other trades unionists of other parties and none, were forging ahead in engineering, buses, railways, and builders. Work in reformist unions was essential to developing new forms of militant leadership. In effect, this called an end to the fiction of red unions in Britain at least.

With a decision of the CP central committee in January 1932, a stop was put to such initiatives as Thompson was engaged in, as district Party controls began to reassert themselves, implying more local contact and familiarity with the local labour movement. He was sent back to the docks by the NMM. Following agitation at the Red Lion Wharf, Upper Thames Street, and "in disgust at the repeated failure of the officials of the Transport Union to settle the many long-standing grievances of the dockers at this wharf, it was decided that the Port Workers' Unity Movement, which is leading the struggles of the London dockers, should take a hand". Fred Thompson addressed the men and they "decided to tabulate the outstanding questions which the union had had in hand for over a year". Taking the matter out of the hands of the union officials entirely, a committee of five of the workers was elected to interview the "principal of the firm the following morning ... (and to) authorise the committee to call a strike for Monday morning in the event of the demands not being granted, and to report back."⁵²

Subsequently, Thompson appears to have been working with the *Daily Worker*, probably after 1935. In 1937, the paper reported that it had been "limiting results obtained from the recruitment of new readers on London's May Day by members of our staff to the editorial department only":

"For Gabriel [the cartoonist—GS] didn't win first prize, after all. He made ten new readers, but Fred Thompson, of our advertising staff, went one better – no, four better. Fred's work among the transport section (and not the busmen part of it!) won us 14 new regular readers. Further, at a May Day meeting in the evening, he added another 12. Twenty-six in one day. No doubt about it, the prize goes to Fred."⁵³

It is the last we can so far discover about him. The Party was at rock bottom inside the TGWU by the time it started a broader approach to rank-and-file organising, initially in buses and then in engineering, that would far surpass these early days.

■ This article, based on Graham Stevenson's online biography of Fred Thompson,⁵⁴ was submitted by Graham on 12 February 2020, ie just 2½ months before he died. It was intended as a contribution to the celebration of the Communist Party's centenary in 2020, but space did not allow that at the time. It has been slightly edited for length and continuity, with in-text citations replaced by end-notes.

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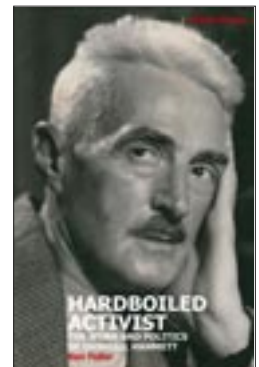
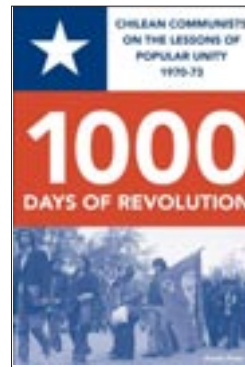
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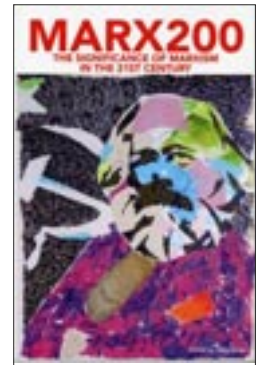
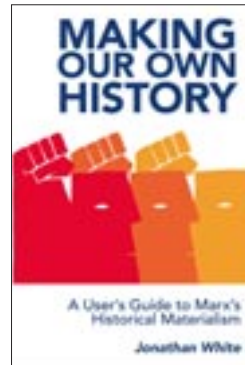
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RUTH PITMAN IN DEFENCE OF THE LAWS OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM



‘There are many examples of the negation of the negation within the continually changing and developing sphere of thought and ideas. In the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the old idea of the “divine rights of kings”, used to justify the rule of absolute monarchies, was discarded. Some countries chose republicanism but many retained what was essentially a continuation of the ideal of feudal hereditary monarchy, sublated as the concept of “constitutional monarchy”. (In Britain, other remnants of feudal hereditary and church privileges, such as the House of Lords, were also retained and ideologically justified.)’

I READ WITH interest John Green’s article ‘Bicentenary of the Birth of Friedrich Engels’ in *CR97*. However, there was one part of the article where I found myself disagreeing with the author, namely, the section where he criticises those of Engels’ writings that eventually became the book *Dialectics of Nature*. In particular, I was dismayed to read that:

“These so-called ‘laws’ of dialectics are, though, not really scientific laws ... not scientifically demonstrable or mathematically expressible in the same way as genuine scientific laws are; nor do they, in themselves, really help us predict the behaviour of materials or societies.”¹

This contribution aims to defend the validity of the laws of dialectical materialism and their continuing relevance for political activists in today’s rapidly changing world, and hopes to stimulate further discussion around this topic.

Some thoughts on science, its laws and its theories

Marx and Engels always claimed that their method for understanding the world in order to change it was scientific, especially in contrast to the then fairly widespread ideas of the Utopian Socialists. This claim was rooted in their materialist philosophy, the origins of which, in the West at least, go back to the ideas of the gifted scientists and philosophers of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment science began with observation and the evidence of the senses, to which were added the power of human reason, enabling analysis. Observation remains a major source of factual information for many of the natural sciences, including astronomy, geology, biology and environmental science.

A much narrower view of science, still fairly popular today, owes much to the influence of Karl Popper (1902-1994), right-wing philosopher, founder member of the Mont Pelerin Society and virulent anti-communist. Popper’s contention was that “real science” could only progress by means of “falsifiable hypotheses” – theories that, if they were false, could be definitely proved to be so, by, for example, experiment. For Popper, everything else was “pseudoscience”. To the extent that Popper’s writings were aimed at discrediting Marxism’s claim to be scientific, they certainly gained some traction as, unsurprisingly, his views were given widespread notice in establishment publications and media. However, his “falsifiable hypothesis” strictures also gave him some very serious problems when applied to the theories of some of humanity’s greatest scientists, such as Charles Darwin.

Laws of (natural) science are human concepts that reflect

observed or tested regularities among phenomena of nature, sufficient to enable prediction in the same circumstances (ie within the stated or implied boundaries of the particular law). Examples include the law of gravity, laws of thermodynamics, Boyle’s law. Observed regularities can be tested by further observation, experience, experiment or, as Engels noted, by their application in technology. It would be incorrect to say that nature ‘obeys’ the laws of science, which are after all only human concepts. Rather these laws are discovered or revealed in the course of the scientific study of nature. Note that laws only need to describe the observed regularities. They do not need to explain them: this is the role of scientific theories (falsifiable or otherwise!).

The laws of dialectics that were proposed by the German idealist philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) were focussed on the sphere of human thought. At a time when many philosophers were searching for the ‘eternal’ and ‘universal’ in human thought, Hegel recognised that human thought had a history, had changed and developed over time, and continued to do so. Hegel’s laws reflected the regularities which he had observed in this motion, change and development of thought. Hegel also attempted to trace out the internal connections between nature, society and thought. But Hegel the idealist regarded these observed interconnections as evidence of his concept of a non-material, independently existing “Absolute Idea”, of which the world was merely a *manifestation*. (Was the Absolute Idea the same as God? Hegel was ambiguous here, as elsewhere in his writings).

So, why did the idealist philosopher Hegel have such an influence on the materialists Marx and Engels? Hegel’s great merit, wrote Engels, was that he was the first to systematically present nature, human society and human thought as being in constant motion, change, transformation and development. Moreover, as Engels noted:

“... in hundreds of passages Hegel is capable of giving the most striking individual illustrations of the dialectical laws from nature and history.”²

Marx and Engels were impressed with Hegel’s insights. They identified similar dialectical processes in the motion, change and development of human society. While history provided evidence from past societies, the evidence for such processes in contemporary society was all around them. They lived and wrote in times of rapid change. Although the Industrial Revolution had been more or less completed in mainland Britain, its spread throughout Europe and elsewhere was resulting in major social and political upheavals.

Evidence from the natural world was provided by some fields of natural science that had begun to focus on processes of change and development, for example, geology and, a little later, Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection.

The relevance of this for the Marxist method was that any understanding of nature, society or thought, to be scientific, *must* study the world in its motion, change, transitions, development and interconnectedness, and NOT as if it were static or as if world phenomena existed in isolation from each other. Marx therefore reworked on a materialist basis what he considered insightful and useful from Hegelian dialectics, including Hegel's laws. Marx and Engels saw these *reworked laws of dialectical materialism* as the most general laws of motion, change and development, reflecting processes in the natural world, in society and in human thought. (We should note that detailed understanding of the operation of these laws in any particular field also requires specialist knowledge of that field.)

In Marx's own words from 1873:

"My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, *ie* the process of thinking, which, under the name of "the Idea", he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea". With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind and translated into forms of thought. ... The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."³

The three laws of dialectical materialism, as stated by Engels, are:

- The law of the interpenetration of opposites.
- The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa.
- The law of the negation of the negation.⁴

The remainder of this article looks at each of these laws in turn. It attempts to briefly explain the meaning of each law, with real-world examples from nature, society and thought that the author has found particularly useful in furthering her own understanding of the law. Any alternative names for the law (mainly from Soviet philosophers) are noted. Finally, the author outlines how knowledge of each law has helped to guide her understanding of events, policies and ideologies in our fast-changing modern world.

The law of the interpenetration of opposites

aka The law of the unity and conflict (or struggle) of opposites

This law reflects Marx's and Engels' understanding that contradictions are what drive motion, change and development in nature, society and thought. One of the most important concepts of Marxism, contradictions involve opposing and conflicting properties, forces and interests in objects and systems. It is the contradictions within an object or system that define its very essence, that make it what it is and not something else, and that cause the motion, change and development that are characteristic of that particular object or system. A complex system will involve many

contradictions, as will its sub-systems, sub-sub-systems etc. (We should also note the modern usage of the term 'tensions' to indicate what are clearly understood by Marxists as contradictions.)

As well as conflict between opposites, dialectical materialism also recognises that within a contradiction there is interpenetration (or 'unity') of opposites. Firstly, this is because an 'opposite' cannot exist without something to oppose it, otherwise it would be illogical to describe it as an opposite. Opposites cannot exist without each other. We see this clearly even in the language of everyday concepts such as large and small, tall and short, good and bad. Secondly, and more significantly, it is because 'both sides' of the contradictions within an object or system define it and determine its motion, change and development as the conflicting forces 'play out' against each other.

An example of real-world contradiction from the realm of physics and chemistry is the role of positive and negative charge in the motion and change of sub-atomic particles, electricity and chemical reactions.

An example from the biological world is the predator/prey relationship. Prey species continually evolve to escape their predators, while the predator species continually evolve more effective means of capturing prey. These processes influence the direction of evolution of both predator and prey species – sometimes described by biologists as locking predator and prey into a sort of 'evolutionary arms race'.

For an example from human society we need look no further than the history of class-based societies where there is clear antagonism between the interests of the exploiter and the exploited classes. Within the given mode of production, the two opposites mutually determine each other.

In the realm of thought and ideas, we see this class contradiction reflected in the views on society held by the bourgeoisie and its ideologues. The capitalist class was born with its members competing against each other for market share and profits. Thus, they value competition over cooperation. Capitalists value individualism over ideas of community and society, as expressed by Margaret Thatcher's infamous statement that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families. Capitalists value the rights of property and profit over the needs of people. By contrast, working people learn to value solidarity and cooperation as a result of class struggle. Moreover, cooperation is deeply rooted in the earliest history of the human race.

Foreign policy is an area where capitalism has been especially successful in hiding its real motives of plunder, expropriation and control of other countries, which, if known, would be completely unacceptable to many or most ordinary members of the public today. This has enabled imperialism to mislead sections of the left sufficiently to at least dampen down opposition to its imperialist policies or even to garner support for them. Examples abound. One argument in favour of the Cold War against the USSR was the liberation of the populations of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from the 'evils of communism'. The Korean and Vietnamese Wars were supposedly fought for the same stated reason. The new Cold War brewing against China is being stoked up by similar propaganda. Whole countries, rich in resources and/or of strategic importance (Iraq, Libya and Syria spring to mind here), have been trashed by 'humanitarian interventions', ostensibly to remove dictators and implement 'democracy'. A sudden concern for women's rights in Afghanistan has been used as a justification for the war there. Perhaps most bizarrely of all have been intermittent outbreaks of concern

for trade union rights – used to justify extensive support for Solidarnosc in Poland and today, in Belarus. Various sections of the left have been led objectively to aid imperialism by spreading its propaganda, often enhanced and embellished to appeal to their own particular audiences.

Knowledge of this law helps us to maintain relentless focus on the contradictions that continue to exist within society and thought, and determine their development. Ignoring or downplaying the contradiction between the interests of the capitalist class and the interests and needs of the working people, whose labour creates society's benefits, leaves Marxists and others on the left open to capitalist ideology and propaganda. This may even lead to complete capitulation, for example, voluntary dissolution of Communist Parties by their leaderships – eg Browderism in 1940s CPUSA, the CPGB in 1991 and, most cataclysmic of all, the CPSU in 1991.

The law of the transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa

aka The law of the transformation of quantitative change into qualitative change

We need to begin here by defining terms. 'Quality', as used by Marx and Engels and many earlier philosophers, refers to the set of characteristics, contradictions and processes that make something what it *is* and not something else – for example, the anatomical, physiological and behavioural characteristics that make an animal a dog and not a bird. Quality reflects the *essential* properties and contradictions that define an object or system at a given time and is the result of that object's history of development. On the other hand, 'quantity', as used in the context of this law, reflects the fact that all objects and systems have a typical set of *inessential* characteristics that often involve different numerical properties, for example, their number, magnitude, volume, different proportions of parts, and relative importance of their constituent sub-systems. An example here could be the domestic dog. Dogs vary enormously in size, in the relative proportions of their different body parts, in the colour and growth of their hair coats, and in the characteristics of behaviour and temperament that have been bred into them by humans. But they nevertheless all display the quality of 'dog' and are easily recognisable as such.

This law reflects how Marx and Engels observed change and development of objects and systems to occur in different ways, depending on whether the changes affected the essential or inessential characteristics of the object or system. It also explains the Marxist concept of *revolution*.

What they termed *quantitative* change occurs via changes in the inessential properties or aspects of an object or system. At the level of the object or system as a whole, these changes appear small and gradual. Such quantitative changes do not affect the quality of the object or system. Though changed, it nevertheless remains essentially the *same* thing. Thus quantitative change reflects a *continuation* of the existing object or system, though with changes and adaptations, some of which may be quite substantial. However, the accumulation of these sorts of change inevitably begins to have some effect on the 'balance of forces' of the system's internal contradictions.

Qualitative change occurs when the accumulation of internal quantitative changes (or the effects of major changes or events external to the object or system) so exacerbates its main contradiction or contradictions that it becomes no longer viable in its existing form. A sort of 'tipping point' is reached, such that a *major* change then occurs in which the object or

system changes in its essential quality and becomes something else, something new, something *qualitatively different*. This may take place quite quickly or over a longer period of time.

In the physical world, numerous examples exist of the working of this law other than that of the oft-quoted ice-water-steam phase transition. One such example involves the number of protons contained in the nuclei of atoms – what used to be called the atomic number, now proton number (symbol Z). When the different chemical elements are being formed, they each take a different number of protons in their atomic nuclei. This quantitative difference in the number of protons results in elements that are *qualitatively* different in their essential properties, from hydrogen to carbon to sulphur to uranium.

An example from the biological world relates to Darwinian evolution by natural selection. The individual members of most species of plants and animals exhibit small, mainly *quantitative* variations in their structure, metabolism and external appearance. We now know that these variations are caused by mutations that occur spontaneously in the organisms' DNA, their genetic 'blueprint'. Natural selection preserves mutations that help the organism to survive and disadvantages or destroys the individuals with mutations that hinder survival. Thus the characteristics of a species can change slowly and gradually over time. However, if the environment changes rapidly and/or part of the population of a species becomes isolated from the rest, then some mutations that were previously neutral to survival, or even those previously unfavourable in this respect, may become beneficial. The gradual accumulation of such mutations can eventually result in the emergence of a new species – a *qualitative* change. Darwin and later biologists have shown that the whole evolution of life on earth is a result of this interplay of quantitative and qualitative changes. (Of course, they would not use these Marxist terms!)

The emergence of capitalism from feudalism, and capitalism's subsequent history, provide a good example of the quantitative and qualitative changes involved in the development of human society. This example also serves to show how both types of change interrelate in a complex system like a human society that has many sub-systems, sub-sub-systems etc.

The first emerging shoots of capitalism in Britain were seen round about 1500 CE, with *qualitative* changes in the way that some sectors within feudal society produced their necessities of life and some political changes. However, the extensive changes involved in what is now generally termed the 'Industrial Revolution' (very approximately, from the mid-18th to the mid-19th Centuries) represented a clear *qualitative* change that could be said to have *completed* the revolution from feudalism to capitalism. This involved not just revolutionary changes in the mode of production and its use of technology, but also in the class system and which class held state power, and in the political system.

Many changes have occurred in capitalism in the more than 150 years since the completion of the 'Industrial Revolution'. These include revolutionary changes in many of capitalism's sub-systems – including in production technology and methods, energy sources, methods of communication and transport and concessions extracted from the capitalists to improve the conditions of at least some sections of the working class. Despite all these qualitative changes in its sub-systems, however, capitalism itself remains still, recognisably, capitalism.

In the realm of human thought, an interesting illustration,

coming from a non-Marxist perspective, of how both quantitative and qualitative forms of change can be observed in the development of thought in the natural sciences is provided by the US physicist and science historian Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996), in his influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*⁵. (There seems to be no evidence that Kuhn had any prior knowledge of Hegelian or Marxist dialectics.) Kuhn describes how what he called “normal science” takes the form of painstaking, detailed research that adds to the sum of human knowledge little by little – *quantitative* change. Each particular scientific field uses its own *paradigm* – its accepted set of assumptions, models and techniques. However, from time to time a crisis may occur in a particular science when the paradigm used is found to be no longer fit for purpose – no longer able to accommodate new discoveries or to answer new questions being asked. Then the old paradigm is abandoned and a new one takes its place. This is often accompanied by a period of dispute and disagreement among the scientific community involved and there may be competing ideas on the form of the new paradigm. Today known as ‘paradigm shifts’, Kuhn was happy to call such qualitative changes in scientific thought *revolutions*.

This law helps us on to understand that social revolutions involve both objective and subjective factors. We can’t have a revolution just because we want one – some Trotskyists and anarchists please note! The relationship between the objective and subjective aspects of revolution was brilliantly analysed by Lenin in his explanations of the revolutionary situation that had arisen in Russia and of the characteristics needed by a vanguard party to lead the revolution to a successful conclusion. It also shows up the non-dialectical nature of Trotsky’s call for “permanent world revolution” at a time when the objective conditions for further revolutionary change were fading.

This law also helps us to understand that some sort of ‘tipping point’, caused by a sharpening of internal and sometimes external contradictions, is necessary for a qualitative change to occur in society or ideas. Information on current conditions in this respect may sometimes be gleaned from serious non-Marxist writers, for example, the well-researched book *The Shock Doctrine*⁶ by Naomi Klein. We should also note what can happen when our class opponents steal a march on us in this respect. For example, the group of right-wing political economists inspired and led by Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992) and Milton Friedman (1912-2006) recognised that the post-war ‘capitalist boom’ had begun to run into trouble and seized the opportunity to push forward their long-held ultra-liberal economic and right-wing political theories to conservative politicians and the economics establishment. Thus they were able to influence conservative leaders (Reagan, Thatcher, Pinochet and others) to abandon the then mainstream Keynesian economics and implement harsh neoliberal policies. Likewise, following the 2007-8 financial crash, conservative and social-democratic governments used the crisis to implement further cuts in living standards and benefits for working people, under the guise of ‘we’re all in it together’ austerity.

The law of the negation of the negation

In everyday language, the term ‘negation’ is generally used to invalidate or dismiss something, to say ‘No’ to something. However, in materialist (and Hegelian) dialectics it has a very specific meaning. Negation is the process of the replacement of the ‘old’ (objects, systems, ideas) by the ‘new’. This occurs

as a result of qualitative change, itself driven by contradictions, as explained above by the first two laws of dialectical materialism. This third law completes the *general* description of motion, change and development in nature, society and thought.

The law of the negation of the negation reflects the fact that this process of change and development via replacement of the ‘old’ by the ‘new’ is continual, ongoing, such that the ‘new’ is itself replaced by something ‘newer’, which in turn is replaced by a ‘newer new’, and so on. This raises an interesting question – what happens to the ‘old’ when it is replaced by the ‘new’? Where thought and ideas are concerned, the old ideas can be simply discarded (although often they are not). But in the material world, ‘old’ matter cannot simply disappear into thin air. The answer from dialectical materialism is that the ‘old’ is sublated into the ‘new’, where it is preserved in a different form, according to the new conditions.

Engels, in the book known today as *Anti-Dühring*, gives real-world examples of the law of the negation of the negation in the physical, biological and socio-economic spheres.⁷ These examples, three of which I have summarised below, also provide further information on this law.

As an example from the physical world, Engels writes:

“Furthermore, the whole of geology is a series of negated negations, a series of successive shatterings of old and deposits of new rock formations.”

He goes on to explain how rocks are weathered and eroded until the matter of which they are formed eventually ends up as sediment in the oceans. (We now know that rocks and sediment are also subducted back down below the Earth’s solid crust by movement of tectonic plates.) Further geological processes, for example, collisions of tectonic plates and volcanic eruptions, may subsequently raise up parts of the seabed or extrude molten rock to the surface, forming new rocks. These processes are then repeated over millions and billions of years, continually ‘recycling’ old rocks and forming new ones.

Engels takes a grain of barley as an example from the biological world. Seed production forms the end of the natural lifecycle of many flowering plants. Provided the seed encounters suitable environmental conditions of moisture and temperature it will germinate. The seed is thus negated and a new plant develops. The new plant will grow, flower, set seed and die. Provided the seed is able to germinate, this process will repeat endlessly – a series of negations of the negation. However, as Engels points out, grains of barley may be negated in ways that prevent a subsequent negation of the negation – brewed as beer or crushed as animal feed. We thus see that negation of the negation is not historically inevitable, it only occurs under specific conditions for each particular object, system or process.

As an example from socio-economic development, Engels references Marx’s use of the term negation of negation in *Capital*:

“The capitalist mode of production and appropriation, hence the capitalist private property, is the first negation of individual private property founded on the labour of the proprietor. Capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a process of nature, its own negation. It is the negation of the negation. This re-establishes individual property, but on the basis of the acquisitions of the capitalist

era, *ie* on cooperation of free workers and their possession in common of the land and of the means of production produced by labour.”⁸

We see here another characteristic of development via negation of the negation – that development occurs not in a circle, as was a common theory at the time (and is still sometimes heard today), but rather in a ‘spiral’ form, sublating the old in a new, higher form each time.

There are many examples of the negation of the negation within the continually changing and developing sphere of thought and ideas. In the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the old idea of the ‘divine rights of kings’, used to justify the rule of absolute monarchies, was discarded. Some countries chose republicanism but many retained what was essentially a continuation of the ideal of feudal hereditary monarchy, sublated as the concept of ‘constitutional monarchy’. (In Britain, other remnants of feudal hereditary and church privileges, such as the House of Lords, were also retained and ideologically justified.)

Understanding this law helps us to recognise what is new and different in every revolution, revolutionary situation and progressive social movement, even when these have clearly been inspired by past leaders and movements. Every socialist revolution in the 20th century was different. Ways of opposing capitalism have changed over time and continue to do so. At the same time, we learn to beware of what has been sublated from the past – ideas, methods and structures from capitalism (or even earlier) that remain, more or less hidden, in modern movements and progressive endeavours.

Conclusion

It is argued here that the legacy left to us by Marx and Engels has two interrelated parts. The first is the body of completed writings that has come down to us, some not published until many years after their deaths. The second is the *method* of dialectical materialism, at once both philosophical and scientific, that they used for understanding the world in order to change it. It was the consistent application of this method that enabled them to lay down their extensive body of observation, analysis, theory and comment covering many aspects of human endeavour. They did this in the conditions of their times. Therefore their writings should be understood in *context*, not followed blindly as if they were sacred texts handed down by a prophet. The fact that their writings contain so much that is as true and relevant today as it was 150 years ago shows how well their method enabled them to identify the main driving factors in the development of economies, societies, politics and thought.

We do not need self-proclaimed ‘critical Marxists’ (even those who have gained minor celebrity status due to Establishment promotion of their books and mainstream media appearances) to ‘revise’ or ‘rethink’ Marxism for the 21st Century for us. Marxist dialectics rightly orients us towards viewing the world in its interconnections and processes of motion, change and development. However, materialist dialectics must not be reduced to this basic general understanding. A more detailed knowledge of the laws of dialectical materialism is needed to ‘put flesh on the bones’ of our understanding.⁹ Our task should be to study and understand the Marxist method for ourselves, in its full richness of detail, and learn to apply it in the objective and subjective circumstances of our own times.

Notes and References

- 1 J Green, *Bicentenary of the Birth of Friedrich Engels*, in *CR97*, Autumn 2020, p 5.
- 2 Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, Ch 2, ‘Dialectics’, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 2nd edn, 1954, p 63; also in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)*, Vol 25, p 357.
- 3 Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Afterword to the 2nd German Edition, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p3.htm>; in *MECW*, p 19.
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- 7 Engels, *Anti-Dühring, Part 1 – Philosophy*, Ch 13, at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch11.htm>; also in *MECW*, Vol 25, pp 124-7.
- 8 Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Ch 32, in *MECW*, Vol 35, p 751; quoted by Engels in *Anti-Dühring*, Ch 13, *op cit*.
- 9 Also helpful here would be an understanding of the dialectical materialist treatment of the philosophical categories – regarded for millennia as the ‘building blocks’ of thought (beyond the scope of this article).

TITLE PAGE IMAGE

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MARTIN JENKINS MARX, STIRNER AND HUMAN NATURE



‘So, after 1845, there is no inherent human nature – such as Feuerbach’s “species-being” – nor a human nature as the dynamic agency behind socio-historical change, *ie* the overcoming of estrangement/alienation suffered under capitalism by the advent of communist society. The “human essence” is now understood as the ensemble of the social relations, themselves conditioned by a mode of production.’

Karl Marx: *Thesis on Feuerbach* 1845

IN THE PERIOD 1843-45, Karl Marx composed significant works such as the *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* (1843), *Letters in the German-French Yearbooks* (1843), *On the Jewish Question* (1843) and the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction* (1843-4). He also worked out a lot of his thoughts in the *Paris Notebooks*, from which the *Comments on James Mill’s Elements of Political Economy* (1844) and the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* – never intended for publication – were later abstracted.¹ Throughout these various texts, I propose that Marx can be seen to be thinking and working within conceptual categories and problematics heavily influenced by the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872).

Although the influence of Feuerbach is, I contend, quite plain to see, it is synthesised with political economy. In other words, whilst Marx was working with Feuerbachian concepts such as human essence, estrangement and the overcoming of estrangement, the concepts were not taken *en bloc* with Feuerbach’s larger philosophy; but were associated with, and explained in connection with, the material conditions of society – in particular, with capitalist society. This influence ends with *The German Ideology* in 1845/6 and the *Theses on Feuerbach*. This, I believe, is due to the rarely recognised influence upon Marx of Max Stirner’s *The Ego and its Own*. Instead, Feuerbach is invariably mentioned as the last Young Hegelian who influenced the development of Marx’s early thinking. A quick overview of Feuerbach’s philosophy may make this clearer.

Ludwig Feuerbach

In works such as *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843), Feuerbach criticises Hegel’s absolute idealism for remaining restricted within abstractions.² Maintaining that Hegel’s abstract postulations, their dialectical negation and reconciliation on a higher, comprehensive level *occur wholly and ineffectively in thought*, Feuerbach begins instead with actual, material human beings and their living conditions.

Idealism, says Feuerbach, had made thought (the subject) primary – this being identical with God/reason/truth – and reduced the world, and human beings, to secondary results of it (predicates). To be rid of idealist obfuscation, the inversion of subject and predicate was itself to be inverted: human beings in the world are the primary subject, while thought is a derivative predicate. (In his earlier work *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), he had famously defined the Abrahamic God as a predicate of the human subject and not the creating genesis of the latter.³) The idealist inversion (itself a consequence of the trajectory of rationalist philosophy since Descartes, perhaps even Plato) had, by positing thought/God as primary, estranged material humanity

from its real self, from its real nature and its way of true, natural being. Achieving materialism in this way, Feuerbach prescribed a humanist ethic of actual real being as the foundation of the just society; this arose naturally from the essence of human nature or species-being (*Gattungswesen*) just being itself and expressing itself.

In brief, according to Feuerbach, there is a definite human essence (species-being), which naturally objectifies or expresses itself in being, social being itself. However, this essence becomes estranged and thereby an alien governing power over human beings. This inversion is to be inverted, allowing human beings to be themselves again.

Marx, paying great tribute to Feuerbach, wrote in his *Paris Notebooks*:

“Feuerbach is the only person who has a serious and a critical attitude to the Hegelian dialectic and who has made real discoveries in this field. He is the true conqueror of the old [Hegelian –MJ] philosophy. The magnitude of his achievement and the quiet simplicity with which he presents it to the world are in marked contrast to the others.”⁴

Engels described how a reading of *The Essence of Christianity* “broke the spell” of and helped cast aside Hegel’s idealist system – “we all became at once Feuerbachians” – and said that the influence of Feuerbach can be seen in Marx’s *The Holy Family*.⁵ Yet Marx was also familiar with the other works of Feuerbach, so his influence cannot be reduced to *The Essence of Christianity* alone.

Positive Humanism

From 1843 onwards, Feuerbachian categories and modes of expression suffuse Marx’s writing, albeit grounded and modified from 1843 onwards by political economy. For example, in his *Critique of Hegel’s Dialectic and General Philosophy*, Marx writes that communism “is humanism mediated with itself through the supersession (*Aufhebung*) of private property”.⁶ Only when this mediation is so superseded, will “positive humanism, positively originating in itself, come into being”. Again, in *Private Property and Communism* we find Feuerbachian categories and terminology:

“(3) Communism is the positive supersession of private property as human self-estrangement, and hence the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a social, *ie* human, being, a restoration which has become conscious and which takes place within the entire wealth of previous

periods of development. This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man, the true resolution of the conflict between existence and being, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution".⁷

Private property is the manifestation of human self-estrangement. The positive supersession of this is found with communism which restores humanity to itself as a social, as a truly human being. We can here see the influence of Feuerbach.

In the article *Estranged Labour* Marx writes:

"This fact simply means that the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object; it is the *objectification* of labour. The realisation of labour is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realisation of labour appears as a *loss of realisation* for the worker, objectification as *loss of and bondage to the object*, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation.

...

Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself. The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien."⁸

Finally, in *The Holy Family*, written in Autumn 1844 but published early the following year, we read Feuerbachian-influenced criticisms of the Critical Criticism of the Young Hegelians' neo-Hegelianism.⁹ The inversion of subject and object is clearly practiced by Edgar Bauer who:

"... changes love into a 'goddess' ... by making 'Love' a being apart, separate from man and as such, endowed with an independent being. By this simple process, by changing the predicate into the subject, all the attributes and manifestations of human nature can be critically transformed into their opposite and estrangements. Thus, for example, Critical Criticism makes out of criticism, as a predicate and activity of man, a subject apart, Criticism referring to itself and therefore, Critical Criticism: a Moloch, the worship of which contains the self-immolation and suicide of man and, in particular, of his ability to think".¹⁰

This Feuerbachian theme provides the general thrust of Marx's arguments in *The Holy Family*, namely, that by inverting subject (human) and predicate (mind), making mind primary and organary, the Young Hegelians remained trapped within and emphasised the primacy of theory and theoretical creations which, as *sui generis* manifestations of reason, have little connection with actual, socio-material circumstances.

For Marx of 1844, the actual inversion of subject (human species-being) and predicate (human activity) is present in the dialectical class struggle between capitalist and proletariat which has human activity primary (capitalism) and the human being as predicate, estranged and alienated from its own nature, products, activity and other beings:

"Proletariat and wealth are opposites; as such they form a single whole. They are both forms of the world of private property. The question is what place each occupies in the antithesis. It is not sufficient to declare them two sides of a single whole.

Private property as private property, as wealth, is compelled to maintain *itself* and thereby its opposite, the proletariat, *in existence*. That is the positive side of the contradiction, self-satisfied private property.

The proletariat, on the other hand, is compelled as proletariat to abolish itself and thereby its opposite – the condition for its existence, which makes it the proletariat, *ie* private property. That is the *negative* side of the contradiction, its restlessness within its very self, dissolved and self-dissolving private property.

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class finds in this self-estrangement its confirmation and its good, *its own power*: it has in it a *semblance* of human existence. The class of the proletariat feels annihilated in its estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence. In the words of Hegel, the class of the proletariat is in abasement indignant at that abasement, an indignation to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human *nature* and its condition of life, which is the outright, decisive and comprehensive negation of that nature.

Within this antithesis, the private property-owner is therefore, the conservative side, the proletarian, the *destructive* side. From the former arises the action of preserving the antithesis, from the latter, that of annihilating it."¹¹

So, from the few examples provided above, it is plain to see Marx employing Feuerbachian categories and perspectives in his writings of 1843 to 1844/5.

Max Stirner

Copies of Max Stirner's *Die Einzige und sein Eigenthum (The Ego and Its Own)* began appearing in late 1844. In his letter to Marx dated 19 November 1844, Engels states that he has read the specimen sheets of the work. Picking up on the work's emphasis on egoism, Engels remarks that it "is simply the essence of present society and present man brought to consciousness". Unlike Moses Hess, he regards the *Einzige* as important, for it must not "simply be cast aside"; it must, rather be used "as the perfect expression of present-day folly and *whilst inverting it*, continue to build upon it."¹²

In a letter to Heinrich Bornstein dated late December 1844 or early January 1845, Marx tells him that "It is impossible for me to let you have the review of Stirner before next week."¹³ On about 20 January 1845, writing to Marx, Engels states that, having had time to think, after being "too much under the immediate impression made upon me by the book", he now agrees with him about Stirner.¹⁴ Moses Hess also agrees with Marx and has published an article about him.¹⁵ Engels had left Marx's letter with Hess who intends to study it and to "to use some things out of it".¹⁴

Yet there is no remaining copy of Marx's letter to Engels. When did Marx read Stirner's book? Nothing appears to be mentioned about him until *The German Ideology* of 1845/6. Despite all the efforts of Marx and Engels, this work, comprising some 700 pages¹⁶ in two volumes, was – except for one chapter – not published in their lifetime, so was, as Marx famously later wrote, "abandoned to the gnawing criticism of the mice".¹⁷ After Engels' death, the incomplete manuscript came into the hands of the leaders of the German Social-Democratic party, who over



LEFT: Engels' caricature from 1842. From left: Arnold Ruge, Ludwig Bühl, Carl Nauwerk, Bruno Bauer, Otto Wigand, Edgar Bauer, Max Stirner, Eduard Meyen, three unknown persons, Karl Friedrich Köppen (as captain). Bruno Bauer is stepping on the "line newspaper". There is a decapitation table on the wall, and a squirrel (Eichhorn) is drawn in the left corner (this squirrel is Prussian minister of education Johann Albrecht Friedrich Eichhorn) Reference: Otsuki Maruen Collection Vol 27 p 531

37 years published less than half of it. What has come down to us was published in 1932 by the Marxism-Leninism Institute of the Soviet Communist Party.¹⁸ The second volume, largely written by Moses Hess, is a critique of 'True Socialism'. The first volume, largely written by Marx, is a polemical critique of the representatives of German Philosophy: Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer and, Max Stirner – lampooned as "Saint Max". The chapter on Stirner is the largest section, amounting to three quarters of the volume. This, says CJ Arthur, shows that Marx and Engels considered him "the most dangerous enemy threat to socialist thought at the time."¹⁹

David McLellan writes that Stirner's influence on Marx is underestimated. It "played a very important role in the development of Marx's thought by detaching him from the influence of Feuerbach."²⁰ Before citing the influences of Stirner upon Marx, I will provide a brief account of the main ideas in Stirner's work.

Die Einzige und sein Eigentum

Despite their promulgation of atheism, Stirner regarded the Young Hegelians – particularly Bauer and Feuerbach – as actually perpetuating Christian categories and perspectives. Human beings have permitted themselves to be haunted by "spooks" – definite "essences" such as the soul and God – and have viewed and valued themselves through such prisms. Young Hegelians such as Bruno and Edgar Bauer fought against religious spooks, the latter to be replaced by atheistic Rational Citizens in a Republican State. For Stirner, all that has happened is that one "essence" has been replaced by another: God has been replaced by humanism.

"Whether the one God or the three in one, whether the Lutheran God or the *Être suprême* or not God at all but 'Man', many represent the highest essence, that makes no difference at all for him who denies the greatest essence himself, for in his eyes *those servants of the highest essence are all one and all – pious people, the most raging atheist not less than the most faith filled Christian.*"²¹

It will, Stirner contends, be the same with socialism/communism despite the latter's perceived differences with republican liberalism. Here, a society of labourers exists on the basis of being useful to each other. Human beings will be valued solely as labourers in a "society of labourers" and perceive themselves as having duty to each other in socialist

society.²² Thus arises a new "spook", a new "supreme being", a new "essence" to which individuals are subsumed.

There is, argues Stirner, no "essence" constituting the true nature of the human being and prescribing how s/he ought to live. There is only the "creative nothing" of the unique, individual ego which, is always "other" to any actualisation of itself.

"I am owner of my might and I am so when I know myself as *unique*. In the *unique* one the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, of which he is born. Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it Man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness and pales only before the sun of my consciousness. If I concern myself for myself, the unique one, then my concerns rest on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself and I may then say: All things are nothing to me."²³

The ego recognises no external authority (state, religion, community), only itself and a furthering of mutual interests only as long as convenient in a union of egos. *To reiterate, there is no defining human essence, there is only the "creative nothing" that is each unique ego.*

Stirner's Influence on Marx?

This is not the place for an exposition of Stirner's philosophy. Clearly, it deeply affected Marx as he composed a substantial chapter aimed at Stirner in *The German Ideology*. Yet, why would it have affected Marx to this degree? I propose that Stirner's conception of the "creative nothing" that constitutes the human influenced him to move away from the Feuerbachian conception of human nature he had previously employed. Secondly, we can see in Marx a move away from an alienated essence to what will later be termed the "relations of production" as the prime genesis of class warfare.

In respect of the first point, in Marx's writings of the period 1843-44, the notion of a species-being is prevalent. After 1845, in *The German Ideology* and the *Theses on Feuerbach*, onwards, there is no mention of a *human essence* – no mention of the Feuerbachian species-being which had hitherto informed Marx's view of communism and the class struggle. Instead, to a background of intellectual gestation of what would later be termed "the materialist conception of history", Marx writes that actual material circumstances will play a significant role in what and how people think at any particular time. Human consciousness is not to be analysed in splendid isolation but accounted for in

respect to material circumstances or ‘real life process’ lived by human beings. Thus:

“Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development, but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life.”²⁴

At the time of *The German Ideology*, “material production” and “material intercourse” play a significant role in the dynamics of society and the production of moralities, religions, ideas, ideologies etc – in the content of consciousness. This applies no less to Feuerbachian humanism and to Stirner’s egoism: German ideologies of the time.

Secondly, the content of consciousness, of human nature is not derived from its own “essence”; it is determined by social intercourse borne of productive forces in a definite mode of production. Hence we find in the sixth *Thesis on Feuerbach* written by Marx in Spring 1845:

“Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human. *But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.*”²⁵

So, after 1845, there is no inherent human nature – such as Feuerbach’s “species-being” – nor a human nature as the dynamic agency behind socio-historical change, *ie* the overcoming of estrangement/alienation suffered under capitalism by the advent of communist society. The “human essence” is now understood as the ensemble of the social relations, themselves conditioned by a mode of production. As Alex Callinicos observes:

“The Feuerbachian conception of species-being is explicitly rejected in *The German Ideology*, written by Marx and Engels ... in reply to Stirner but commencing with a lengthy critique of Feuerbach.”²⁶

Conclusion

The change in what Marx considers as the “human essence” is striking. Prior to 1845, we have the Feuerbach-influenced conception of an estranged/alienated human essence under capitalism which, will be rectified with the advent of communism. In 1845 and after, we have the conception of the “human essence” as the ensemble of the social relations and their concomitant mode of society (although, as Kohei Saito has argued,²⁷ Marx did not alter his 1844 insight into the unity of humans and nature until *Capital*). There is nothing inherent or fixed in human nature as there is with Feuerbach’s humanism.

Firstly, as nothing fixed or immutable but the ensemble of the social relations, I find this conception of the human to be similar but not identical with Stirner’s conception of the “creative nothing” of the ego. It cannot be a coincidence that after reading Stirner, the impact can be seen in Marx’s writing.

Secondly and subsequently, the Marxist conception of “human nature” is now one which holds it to be the ensemble of the social relations, of societal influences which were being discerned in *The German Ideology* as a mode of production and which would later be refined as the forces and relations of production and the base and superstructure. These factors and not any alienated “human essence”, are the locus of power and social class struggle.

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MARC VANDEPITTE COVID-19: WHY THE ANGER OF YOUNG PEOPLE IS JUSTIFIED



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YOUNG PEOPLE are increasingly fed up with coronavirus measures. Although they are the least at risk, they have had to give up the most and have been hit the hardest. Their age group is by no means a priority for governments. They feel rightly wronged and angry. But their situation before the pandemic was already anything but rosy.

On the threshold of adulthood, young people long for the same things their parents and grandparents wanted: a decent income, opportunities for development and enough security and safety to build a life. Too few of them are getting those things.

This manifests itself in various ways. Today, more young people and children are growing up in poverty than before. In Flanders, child poverty rose from 6% in 2001 to 14% in 2019. A staggering 22.5% of young people under the age of 18 in the European Union run a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion than adults.¹

Livelihood is getting more and more expensive. Among young adults, this is most acutely felt with housing. In Belgium in 2000, you had to work an average of 44 hours on a median wage to be able to pay the median rent for a house. In 2018, this was already 58 hours. It is also becoming increasingly difficult to buy a house of your own. In the UK, for example, the percentage of people between 35 and 44 who rent a house has tripled in the last 20 years.²

A good job may compensate for the higher cost of living. But that is precisely the problem. In the EU, unemployment under the age of 25 was 15% pre-Covid,³ double the rate of the rest of the working population. At 11%,⁴ the UK figure was three times higher than among the rest of the working population. Many young adults work below their qualifications, which means they are paid less than they should be able to earn.

In addition, many have to make do with temporary jobs (interns, Uber etc), which offer no financial security. In the EU, no less than 43% of workers between the ages of 15 and 24 are in temporary employment.⁵ In the UK, the most recent figures indicate that temporary employment is three times higher among young people than among the rest of the working population.⁶

This financial insecurity means that many young people are increasingly unable to stand on their own two feet and that their own standard of living is increasingly dependent on that of their parents or grandparents (gifts and inheritances).⁷ That is far from a pleasant situation. If no change takes place, the next generation will have to work a few years longer for a pension that will be a lot lower than today. In terms of prosperity, this is the first generation of young people who will be worse off than the previous generation.

And then, of course, there is climate change. According to Belgian climatologist Jean-Pascal van Ypersele:

“The young people in the street know that we are passing on the climate consequences to them. We are now using their future as raw material in our daily lives, like colonialists.”⁸

No wonder the new generation has lost faith in politics. In Flanders, for example, only 18% say they still have confidence in politics,⁹ and a quarter even prefer an authoritarian leader.¹⁰ But at the same time, and perhaps because of their own difficult situation, many young people support policies that fight inequality and help those at the bottom.

The Covid-19 counter-measures have worsened the situation for young people. In addition to women and minority groups, they have been disproportionately affected by the government restrictions. Young people have lower rates of illness, but students and young workers have suffered more than other groups from the economic consequences of the pandemic. According to the OECD, people aged 25 and under were 2.5 times more likely to lose their jobs because of the pandemic than those aged 26-64.¹¹ 80% of jobs lost in the UK in the year to the end of March 2021 have been among workers under the age of 35.¹² Many young people lost their student jobs in the hospitality industry or during the summer of 2020.

Research has also shown that graduating during a recession leads to large initial earnings losses.¹³ The bad starting situation is like a scar, which people carry throughout their career. They gain less work experience (because of temporary unemployment) and/or start with lower wages. Both factors usually have a lasting negative impact on the jobs they take on later.

Mentally, young people have also had to endure more. At that age, you are in the exploration phase of your life, where social contact is very important. When young people do not get the chance to come together in a group at school, in a bar, in a youth movement or a sports club, an essential element is taken away from their lives.

“Young people are the forgotten group of this corona year”, writes bruzz.be.¹⁴ Of all age groups, they are mentally hit hardest by the pandemic. Women and young people have been the most affected by stress, anxiety and depression during lockdown.¹⁵

In addition to this, there is also a lot of pent-up anger that erupts from time to time. There have been riots by young people in Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and other European countries.

Less visible, but perhaps much more dangerous, is increased radicalisation. The *Financial Times* quotes experts as saying that isolation, depression, financial insecurity and job loss make people more susceptible to new ideas and radicalisation.¹⁶ Young people sitting at home more easily fall prey to extremist groups active in such social media forums as Telegram, Gab, Discord and Steam, the video game sharing site. In this sense, the pandemic is the perfect breeding ground for radicalisation.¹⁷ Extreme right-wing parties in Western Europe have been having some success by targeting young people,¹⁸ and have scored well in the polls in recent months.¹⁹

Giving priority to economic interests at the expense of the young generation (among other groups) could have unpleasant political consequences in the long run. The mishandling of the major financial crisis in 2008 created and nurtured populism. The failures in handling the coronavirus crisis could give birth to an even more horrendous monster. We must not let this happen.

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IMAGE: Kill the Bill protest in Leicester, April 2021

LETTERS

COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREECE, KKE
Athens, 23 March 2021

Dear Comrades

We recently read in *Communist Review* No 97 the article entitled 'Communist Internationalism: Completing the Century'. We particularly appreciate some of the positive references made in this article to the KKE and the struggle of the Greek Communists. Nonetheless, at the same time the article states:

"The CPB did not however join the KKE-organised 'Communist Pole' developed from 2008 in opposition to the European Left Party. The 'Pole' required conformity to a standard model of practice largely irrespective of national conditions. Communists in Britain saw this as tending to entrench divisions and failing to respect the democratic autonomy of particular parties within their own national circumstances."

Comrades, we understand that there may be different approaches of our parties to various issues and this is a matter of more substantive discussion. We believe that there can and should be comradely criticism and discussion between CPs at a bilateral and multilateral level, as well as publicly, about issues of such different approaches; however, this particular passage provides the reader with entirely unfounded information. For our part, we would like to clarify the following:

1) Under the influence of the Great October Socialist Revolution, the KKE since its foundation sought its connection with the international workers' and communist movement and joined the 3rd International, ie the Communist International, in which it remained until the end.

2) Even after the dissolution of the Communist International, it continued to

support proletarian internationalism, to seek international cooperation and solidarity among the CPs.

3) After the counter-revolution, since 1998, it took the initiative to organise the International Meetings of Communist and Workers' Parties, which were established and are now held under the responsibility of the Working Group. 120 parties that are on the SOLIDNET list have the right to participate in these meetings.

4) The website <http://www.solidnet.org>, where each CP can promote its positions, operates under the responsibility of the KKE, while there is also a network of rapid mutual information of the CPs.

5) In 2005, the 17th Congress of the KKE elaborated a special Resolution concerning the situation in the international communist movement. This Resolution, among other things, mentioned the necessity of forming a Communist Pole. Specifically, it stated:

"... a more distinct form of cooperation with communist and workers' parties will be shaped, the Communist Pole" that "... will create better conditions in order to confront the difficulties which exist. This will also facilitate the broader anti-imperialist rallying of forces ... by communist parties which are close in their political and ideological viewpoints, which defend Marxism-Leninism, the contribution of socialism we knew, as well as the necessity of the struggle for socialism. Cooperation at a higher level in matters of theory development is necessary regarding the questions that are at the centre of today's conflict. International research must be encouraged on the causes that brought victory for counter-revolution; common strategies against imperialism to be developed."

6) In the following years, the KKE was at the forefront of the formation of the

European Communist Initiative (<https://www.initiative-cwpe.org/>), founded in 2013, and the *International Communist Review* (<https://www.iccr.gr/>), which has been published since 2009. The Theses of the CC of the KKE for the upcoming 21st Congress of the KKE note the following concerning the ECI:

"Our Party was at the forefront of the formation of the European Communist Initiative (ECI), which includes 30 CPs from Europe, as well as the *International Communist Review* (ICR), in which 10 parties participate. Both of these forms of inter-party cooperation are based on specific founding principles and ideological-political framework."

The brief founding declaration of the ECI, which can be accessed for consultation on <http://www.initiative-cwpe.org/en/documents/founding-declaration/>, expresses the joint stance of dozens of European parties against the EU and NATO; the joint vision of a society free of exploitation of man by man, poverty, social injustice, and imperialist wars. The ECI highlighted significant problems that the workers face and put forward demands for their needs; for the right to permanent and stable employment; for exclusively free public health, welfare, and education; for rights in the workplace, political and trade union rights; against wars and interventions.

Thus, if by saying "the 'Communist Pole' which developed in opposition to the European Left Party" you mean the ECI, we would like to note that the given opposition of the ECI to the PEL has a different content. The objectives of the formation of the ECI are related to the struggle against the EU that turns against the working class and the popular strata, the strengthening of the coordination of struggle at a European level, the formation of the conditions for achieving a unified

perception on issues of strategic importance in order for the CPs to meet the growing needs of the class struggle and strengthen their ties with the working class and the popular strata. The struggle against opportunism and social democracy is a precondition for the strengthening of the CPs. The PEL is a mechanism of transformation of communist parties, with the aim of integrating them into the plans of the EU and the bourgeoisies. From this point of view, the operating framework of the ECI clarifies that a party that is a full member of the PEL cannot participate in the ECI.

Comrades,
Based on the above, we believe that the concept of "pole", which is referred to in various Party documents, should be understood in the context of inter-party, equal and comradely cooperation among the CPs based on principles, for the coordination of the

struggle against capital, imperialism, and the EU; for the study of critical contemporary issues of strategic importance in order to draw conclusions from the course of the class struggle. Life has shown that the "autonomy" of each CP is not endangered by this responsible effort of cooperation among the CPs but by strategic elaborations adopted by Eurocommunism and other opportunist variations, which caused severe damage to the communist movement due to the negation of the revolutionary struggle, the incorporation into the capitalist system, and all the negative consequences for the activity and goals of the CPs corresponding to the fulfilment of their mission, the defence of people's interests and the cause of workers' power, the struggle for socialism.

Comradely
**Section of International
Relations of the CC of the KKE**

Communist Review No. 100

Congratulations to the CPB on the centenary of the magazine. The importance of a theoretical magazine cannot be overestimated, especially at a time with capitalism and imperialism in deep crises on almost all issues. In his work *What is to be done?* Lenin stressed the importance of theoretical work in the party. The success of the Russian Bolsheviks, was to a large extent due to their ability to combine theory and practice.

CR is an important magazine, because it covers a wide range of countries in the English-speaking world, but also in the rest of Europe, where there is a great need for political and economic analysis from a Marxist viewpoint.

I wish great success for CR in the future, with many new and young subscribers to fulfil the historical mission of the CPB!

Lars Ulrik Thomsen
Denmark

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FRAN LOCK ON WRITING THATCHER: POETRY, PARTICULARITY, AND WITNESSING TO HISTORY



NOT QUITE a decade after her death, and already cultural depictions of former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher are everywhere in evidence, most recently in the hit Netflix TV series *The Crown*, where she is played by Gillian Anderson. Anderson's portrayal is by no means flattering; it has, in fact, received a great deal of vitriolic backlash from the right-wing press. Good. Except the problem of representing this most bloody and divisive of prime ministers goes far beyond the degree of sympathy with which she is characterised. It has to do with what happens when we translate political figures from the muck and mess of immediate history into slickly produced packages of self-contained narrative. It has to do with what happens when the pain of living memory becomes popular entertainment.

Where Thatcher is concerned, there is so much pain, persistent pain. One significant discomfort I have with *The Crown* and with similar docudramas is that it relegates the events of Thatcher's tenure to a finite and clearly delineated past, when the horrors she inaugurated and presided over are not, in any meaningful measure, 'finished'. As an example, we might consider Orgreave and Hillsborough, and the long and difficult struggles for justice endured by those affected.

The violence that took place at Orgreave was not merely the worst example of police brutality ever witnessed in a modern industrial dispute; it was the culmination of a concerted campaign on behalf of Thatcher's government to diminish the strength of the trade unions. In the years before Orgreave the Conservatives had planned to face and to defeat a strike by the NUM, or by another of the mass-membership unions; to that end they had inextricably allied themselves with the police, awarding pay rises for officers, while workers in nationalised industries were forced to live at the sharp-end of redundancy and privatisation. In the wake of the violence, where mounted police charged protesters, attacking them without justifiable provocation, Thatcher's private secretary wrote to a Home Office official that "The prime minister [...] agrees that the chief constable of South Yorkshire should be given every support in his efforts to uphold the law." A note by her policy advisor, David Pascall, expresses a similarly swift and absolute judgement, describing the miners as a "mob" and as "Scargill's shock-troops".

The legitimisation and bolstering of police brutality as policy could be said to lead inexorably to events at Hillsborough. In not holding the South Yorkshire police force to account for Orgreave, in frustrating inquiries into police violence, and in refusing to

implement reforms, Thatcher's government saw Peter Wright, the chief constable who had overseen the operation at Orgreave, still in charge some four years later. Wright was responsible for appointing David Duckenfield to police the match at Hillsborough, and for heading the campaign to deny responsibility for the disaster, blaming and slandering the victims. The treatment of football supporters at Hillsborough was given official sanction by the brutal policing of the miners' strike. It is all connected, and the search for justice and accountability is ongoing. The repercussions ripple out for years, across generations. The complexity, specificity, and interrelatedness of this pain is not easily accommodated within the docudrama format, which relies heavily on resolution within neatly determined narrative arcs.

An even greater level of unease exists for me around the issue of focus. *The Crown* and similar shows are top-down dramas: we see the subjective effect of the decisions Thatcher made upon herself and her immediate circle. We do not see the wider consequences of those decisions for the thousands of people who suffered them, or we see those consequences only in the broadest possible brush strokes, and not with the nuance and granular particularity of real experience. This creates a vague nostalgic haze around events such as the miners' strike or the invasion of the Falkland Islands. These are cultural milestones, they feel known, but they are little understood; they have become the depoliticised stuff of zeitgeist, emptied of content and of true human cost.

The screen transmits personality, it cannot credibly render the difficult and shadowy reasoning of ideology, which is where Thatcher's murderous toxicity truly lived. How can actors hope to convey this through gesture and tone, within the limits of an accessible light-entertainment script?

They can't, and so viewers are either hoodwinked into a sympathetic identification with the Thatcher 'character', or they may come to relish Anderson's performance as a kind of cartoon Ice Queen, an exaggerated parody of awfulness. At a cultural moment where the line between politics and entertainment is already dangerously blurred, and where political careers rise and fall on the strength of 'personality', this should give us pause. Yes, politicians are people too, but it isn't who they are as human beings that is relevant to us, it is what they do. Learning to read politicians as characters, and political careers as stories of individual exceptionalism, of private triumph or failure, is a disturbing trend with grave implications for our future as voters and citizens.

This has been much on my mind of late. The recent conclusion of the long-awaited inquest into the Ballymurphy Massacre has had me thinking about hidden continuities of state violence. Mrs Justice Keegan delivered a savage indictment of both the British army's actions and the subsequent state-sanctioned efforts to depict the deceased as IRA members. The attack in 1971 is one in a long line of historical injustices that are only now, after decades, beginning to be addressed, including those that took place during Thatcher's tenure.

In particular, I have been thinking about the atrocities carried out by the notorious Glenanne gang, to which is attributed some 120 murders. The Glenanne gang was an informal alliance of ultra-loyalist groups, run with the collusion of the British government. It comprised roughly 40 men, including members of the British police (the Royal Ulster Constabulary), British soldiers, and paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Ulster Volunteer Force. When the inquest into the Ballymurphy Massacre reported, the papers made their usual noises about how the findings could pave the way for prosecutions of armed forces veterans for historical abuses in the North of Ireland. Government and armed forces spokespersons were quick to shout down any such suggestions, highlighting once again the statute of limitations that covers both members of the occupying British forces and

paramilitary groups. The argument being presented is that such a statute of limitations is fair to 'all sides'. It is not. There is an enormous difference between those actions carried out by local paramilitaries, and by those of an occupying nation state. And with regards to collusion with loyalist groups, the British government clearly has much to lose should the extent of that collusion become known.

What these reflections reveal, I think, is that history is still being made; that it is in a continuous process of painful negotiation and discovery. For that reason there would seem to be a greater duty of care attendant upon the treatment of recent history in art and culture. This kind of careful and pressured attention is something lacking in the mainstream media's recent depictions of Thatcher – depictions in which her flawed humanity becomes the only necessary apology for the violent racism, classism, and homophobia of her politics, or in which she becomes a sort of grotesque scapegoat, the embodiment of the worst excesses of neoconservative ideology. Thatcher didn't happen out of air; the ideas she instituted did not disappear in a puff of smoke as soon as she was out of office. Look at Tony Blair and Keir Starmer. Her legacy is a living one, as viscerally present as it is vile. Look at the North of Ireland, and the blatant disregard for Irish life that Tory Brexit has exposed. Look at the victims of police brutality and their families, still waiting for justice after all these years.

The poems I want to present address themes around Thatcher, exploitation and class struggle. Unpacking a language for talking about the trauma of Thatcher and Thatcherism will take time and effort, but these poems, with their meticulous attention to sound and to the texture of particular, lived experience are a vivid and important beginning, a necessary counter-narrative.

The day she died

by Kevin Patrick McCann

There were fireworks,
Dancing in the street,
Ding-dong the witch is
Dead blasting out of stereos

But I stayed in our house,
Curtains closed

Remembering

That day they went back,
All brass bands and banners,
Lives in flinders,
Faces clenched like fists

Remembering

How she closed down the mines
And him sat in that chair
For weeks at a stretch

His thousand yard stare
At the end.

So no, I didn't join in.

Just sat here alone.

Remembering.

they want all of our teeth to be theirs

by Martin Hayes

they want from us total commitment
they want from us our blood and our hunger
they want our flesh
inked with the company's logo on our chest
they want our knuckles to our brains
and all the nerve-ends in between
switched off
they want our sinews and our muscles
sewn together with steal thread
so that we can only move
when they pull their levers
they want all of our teeth to be theirs
so that we can only chew when they chew
ache when they ache
they want us to show them where we keep our guts
so that they can sneak in under the radar
and pull them apart
angry thread by angry thread
until nothing is held
or stitched together anymore
they want us like robots
sat at our workstations every day
not wanting or able to think
of anything other than what their virus
has burrowed into us
and malfunctioned us to think
and what do we want?
we want to be able to walk through the park on a Saturday
afternoon
without feeling anxious
we want to be able to lay out on the grass
drinking ice cold beer
while looking up into the sky
without worrying about office politics
we want to swim in the ocean once a year
and know how we are going to pay for it
we want a mouth full of teeth
that we know we can afford to get fixed
or capped
if ever they should go rotten
we want to be able to enjoy the laughter and song
that comes from having food in the fridge the electricity bill
nearly paid
a car taxed and full of diesel
a medicine cabinet full of floss sticks and Sudocrem
paracetamol and hand cream
Bonjela hair bands
Diazepam and Ansol
we want to be able to live in our block
without the threat of being redistributed
hanging like thick drool dripping from a councillor's panting
mouth
because an entrepreneur took him for a £500 dinner
and promised him a place for his kid in the prep school
that will take our council flat's place
alongside the £65-a-month gym business units
and 1.5 million-pound lofts
we want to feel
be able to say to ourselves
that we are human
and not have to give everything of that away

just so we are allowed to work
just so we are allowed
to exist

Milk Snatcher

by Julia Bell

Father thinks she's great. He tells us so at tea.
He enjoys the nightly news where rabbles
of dirty miners have it handed to them.
These Marxists with their utopias, need to get real.

She is bringing back stability, certainty,
to a hairy country, old and badly clothed,
with naïve teeth and a childish sense of
pageantry. She is telling us

who we are again. And even those
most disinclined to listen to a woman,
love her maternally, no nonsense ways,
and the righteousness of her hair.

I do not like her, and I do not understand
why she is so popular round here.
Jesus said we should love the poor,
not tut at them on the news.

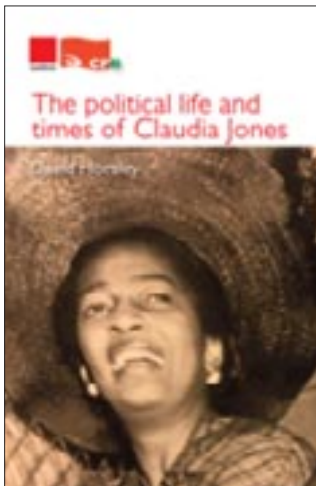
I will live long enough to know that
I am witnessing the slow death of South Wales.
The sick, sliding slag heaps becoming
deep valleys of generational despair.

I have started blushing every time I get upset
and at the tea table I wear a NUM badge sent to me
by the miners, my cheeks on fire. I wrote to them after the news.
Father thinks it's the funniest thing he's ever seen.

Kevin Patrick McCann has published eight collections of poems for adults, and one for children, *Diary of a Shapeshifter* (Beul Aithris), a book of ghost stories, *It's Gone Dark* (The Otherside Books), and *Teach Yourself Self-Publishing* (Hodder) co-written with the playwright **Tom Green**. He is also the author of *Ov* (Beul Aithris), a fantasy novel for children.

Martin Hayes has worked in the courier industry for 30 years. His latest collections are *Ox*, published by Knives Forks and Spoons Press, and *Where We Get Magic From*, published by Culture Matters.

Julia Bell is a writer and Reader in Creative Writing at Birkbeck, University of London where she is the Course Director of the MA Creative Writing. Her work includes poetry, essays and short stories published in the *Paris Review*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *The White Review*, *Mal Journal*, *Comma Press*, and recorded for the BBC. Her most recent book-length essay *Radical Attention* was published by Peninsula Press.



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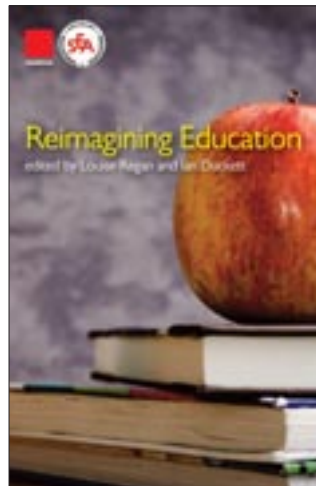
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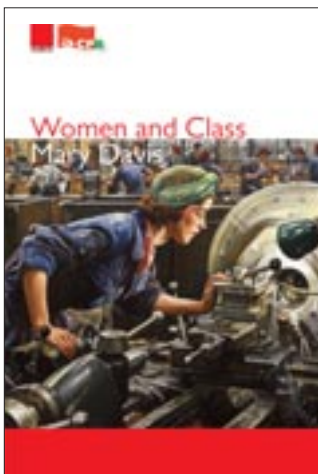


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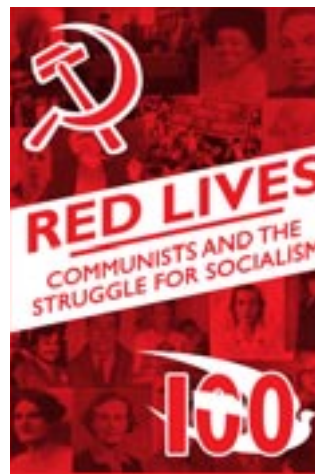
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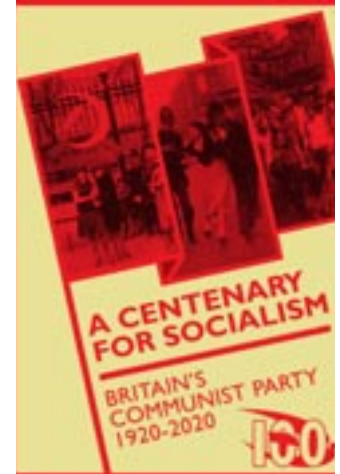
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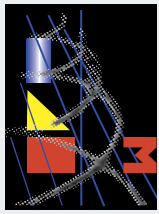
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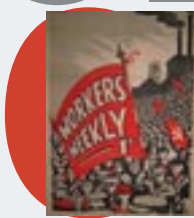
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