

# COMMUNIST REVIEW 109

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Editorial *Martin Levy*

A Virtual World to Win: Class Struggle in the Video Game Industry *Scott Alsworth*

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DISCUSSION A Reply To A Reply *Greg Godels*

SOUL FOOD Igniting the Fire: Poetry and Keeping Hope Alive *Fran Lock*

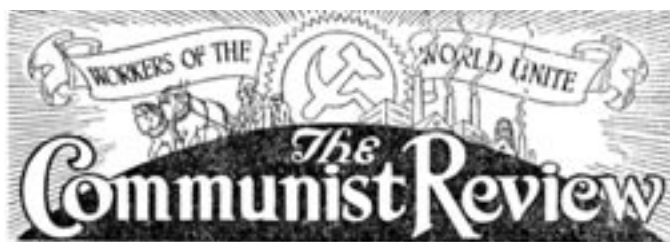
## CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY





## CONTENTS

- 1 **Editorial** *Martin Levy*
- 2 **A Virtual World to Win: Class Struggle in the Video Game Industry** *Scott Alsworth*
- 8 **Après Moi, Le Déluge: Gambling in the 21st Century** *AN Onymous*
- 16 **The Historical Jesus and Marxist Historiography** *James Crossley*
- 23 **BOOK REVIEW With Scalice Aforethought** *Ken Fuller*
- 30 **DISCUSSION A Reply To A Reply** *Greg Godels*
- 34 **SOUL FOOD Igniting the Fire: Poetry and Keeping Hope Alive** *Fran Lock*



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**Front Cover Image:** Still from video game *This War of Mine on Steam*, <https://tinyurl.com/28pm5khv>

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# EDITORIAL

## MARTIN LEVY

12 October 2023

“THE CLASS STRUGGLE is all around us,” says Scott Alsworth in our cover-feature article. It is happening on picket lines and factory floors, in our hospitals and schools. But it is also, as he says, a battle of ideas, where culture plays an important role. The dominant, ruling class culture promotes the illusion of capital’s permanence and power, and revolutionary artists have to choose whether to conform or to accept pariahdom and a lingering spiritual death.

The video games industry is not a classical creative enterprise, but it is, as Scott shows, the biggest in Britain, adding more to the economy than film, TV, music, publishing, design, fashion and architecture combined. And it is still growing, at a staggering rate. Already, 92% of adults aged 16 and over are estimated to be playing video games. But the creative artists in the industry face gruelling working conditions, together with bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment. It is a situation crying out for union organisation, and attempts are already being made to build that, through the Game Workers branch of the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB).

The industry’s development within the existing social relations means that it provides a prime opportunity for promoting ruling class values, and indeed many video games sanitise and glorify modern warfare, normalising violence while promoting nationalistic notions of who our enemies are. But, right from the start, there have been counter-currents among video gamers, seeking to present alternative perspectives. One of those games discussed by Scott, *This War of Mine*, provides the illustration on our front cover. And, he says, the way towards tackling capitalist cultural hegemony is open. The fightback, as real Marxist artists, will require not only the establishment, as a workers’ collective, of at least one video-game studio, but support from the IWGB and Communist Parties internationally.

From gaming to gambling there are only two additional letters, but the worlds could not be more different. That wasn’t always the case, as both terms derive from the Anglo-Saxon *gamen*, meaning play or pastime, and indeed dice games were very popular among our Anglo-Saxon ancestors. And betting played a big role in dice games then, as it does today. Games of chance, of all sorts, remain part of popular culture, and in the past there were people who made a living from it. As Damon Runyan writes in *Guys and Dolls*:

“Many citizens [who follow games of chance for a living] prefer betting on propositions to anything you can think of, because they figure a proposition gives them a chance to outsmart somebody, and in fact I know of citizens who will sit up all night making up propositions to offer other citizens the next day.”

Nowadays, however, as our second article here shows, it is the big betting companies who set up the propositions and define

the odds, employing computer programmers to do so, and using psychology to draw people in, particularly vulnerable customers.

For most punters, there is little chance of beating the system, and those who do so have their bets cancelled or find themselves excluded. As our author (who must remain anonymous) says, it is a system of legalised theft, and there are only two ways forward: nationalisation or prohibition.

From the ridiculous to the sublime? Our next article, by James Crossley, examines from a Marxist perspective “who or what is ‘the historical Jesus’?”. While historians have hitherto attempted to “assess the extent to which it is possible to reconstruct the words and deeds of the figure who was active in Galilee and Judea sometime around the year 30 CE”, James seeks instead to get behind the religious tracts written well after Jesus’ death, and to establish early themes and ideas that were most likely associated with the area at the time. He describes Jesus’ conceptualisation of a new world as reflecting “peasant understandings of hierarchy with a just king ... a theocracy which would replace the Roman Empire and their puppet rulers, dispense justice and ensure a bountiful existence for those saved.”

James says further that “the movement associated with the historical Jesus had obvious differences from what followed.” Christianity became co-opted as the official religion of the Roman Empire, and later provided ideological justification for feudal relations in Europe. But emerging working class and dissident circles in the late 18th and the 19th centuries developed an alternative interpretation of Jesus, from a labouring or poor background, whose opponents were seen in middle-class or upper-class terms. So Christianity has been, as Marx said of religion in general, “the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering.”

Three more articles make up this edition of *CR*. In discussion, Greg Godels replies to Arvinder Kandola’s criticism of his original article in *CR104*. He disputes the assertion that “unequal exchange” explains the inequalities of the imperialist system, and argues that, even if a multipolar world is emerging, we should not place false hope in the rivalries of capitalist states: “If capitalist BRICS governments like Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt etc are challenging the US, it is not the system itself or capitalism, but their place in it.” The rivalries should not be a substitute for class struggle.

We precede that with a lengthy book review from Ken Fuller, thoroughly taking apart the Trotskyist criticisms of the Communist Parties of the Philippines by US academic author Joseph Scalice. And finally, in Fran Lock’s *Soul Food* column, we come full circle back to the cultural struggle, including – appropriately – a poem by our lead author Scott Alsworth. Fran observes that ‘hope’ is an active verb, and we should be seeking ways of being hopeful.

### Notes and References

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# A VIRTUAL WORLD TO WIN: CLASS STRUGGLE IN THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

SCOTT ALSWORTH



COMMUNIST REVIEW Autumn 2023



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‘Later, into the 21st century, we have the advent of modding communities and teams of micro-innovators reshaping video games as a provocative and independent force. This increasing level of autonomy, energised to no small extent by the availability, affordability, and accessibility of development tools, is empowering ‘indie’ studios and attracting working-class artists; frustrating attempts to stifle outside opinions while compounding existing tensions within, with regards to unionisation and an inchoate class-consciousness. The pace of technological progress, accelerated by the ruling elite’s blind pursuit of wealth and their ideological-aesthetic, has, paradoxically, left this cultural bastion vulnerable to attack.’

**T**HE CLASS STRUGGLE is raging all around us. It is, as Marx and Engels observed, a sometimes hidden and a sometimes open fight.<sup>1</sup> Across the country, it’s playing out on picket lines and factory floors, in our hospitals and in our schools; shop assistants, care workers, cleaners, students – millions are waking up and challenging a ruthless system dedicated to putting profit before people.

But this conflict is also a battle for ideas. Culture matters not just because it unites us but because it’s an inviolable arena, belonging to the mind. No wonder then, that the ideas of the ruling classes are in every age the ruling ideas.

The illusion of capital’s permanence and power are sacrosanct. Any artist today, courageous enough to take a stand against neoliberal agendas, must face an impossible choice: assimilation or annihilation. By championing revolutionary politics, artists are forced to accept pariahdom and a lingering, spiritual death; or else, they must conform. This agonising dictum blights every creative enterprise in the UK, including its biggest; the gaming industry.

Video games add more to the British economy than film, TV, music, publishing, design, fashion, and architecture combined.<sup>2</sup> In 2019, some 18,279 game developers contributed a staggering £2.2 bn to the country’s GDP; an increase from £1.8 bn the year before. The growth is looking exponential, and it shows no signs of abating. More and more workers are flocking to development studios; PC gaming is up 46%, and mobile gaming, 17%. Since the introduction of a rebate on production spends in 2014, the annual increase in sales from games in Great Britain has reached 8.9%,<sup>3</sup> demonstrating the trend is not an isolated phenomenon, nor caused by the market boom brought about by the recent COVID-19 lockdowns.

There is also the mainstream impact of virtual and augmented reality to consider, not to mention the future impact of AI-assisted software, the metaverse, and quantum computing. Emergent technologies will change the way we spend our leisure time. In fact, a 2020-2021 survey showed 92% of adults aged 16 and over are already playing video games, while projections for 2025 suggest the number of video game users in the UK will reach 51.8m.<sup>4</sup> If the population reaches the estimated 68.3m mark,<sup>5</sup> that will be 75% of the nation, actively engaging in digital, interactive entertainment. The figure is impressive globally too: 3.5 bn people around the world will soon be video game consumers.<sup>6</sup> In other words, approximately half the planet.

### **Thanks to the US Department of Defense!**

This embarrassment of riches is often lauded by business leaders and politicians as an entrepreneurial success story, made possible by competition between creatives in a capitalist society. Never mind that video games, like other forms of art, are commercialised and regularly steered from their true potential as a means to explore the human condition – and never mind the awkward truth, that this multibillion-pound industry was founded by a group of self-professed hackers who stole time and resources from America’s military-industrial complex to prototype gaming machines. Indeed, all contenders for the much-coveted title of ‘first video game ever’ have one thing in common; a paper trail leading to the US Department of Defense.<sup>7</sup>

Some examples of this historical context are worth exploring, as they lend us an important dialectical perspective. In 1962, expectations at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for missile targeting systems, capable of countering a Soviet first strike, were running high. Yet, what was secretly in development there was *Spacewar!*, a two-player game conceived by Steve ‘The Slug’ Russell, and designed on a PDP-1 computer. Russell and his colleagues were able to secure expensive research time, using a mix of pretences, to build a responsive computer where simulated spacecraft could launch torpedoes at one another while navigating a gravity well. Needless to say, it was a far cry from contemporary video games. The display was comparable to a battleship’s sonar panel with green blips, rendered without sound against a black, starless void. For controls, heavy wooden blocks were used and capped with several switches, allowing both players to move around. Although it was not much to look at, it was a fennel stalk concealing fire; a Promethean gift, snatched from the gods.

Before long, *Spacewar!* spread across the US via the government’s Advanced Research Projects Agency network, the ARPANET, as an early instance of open-source freeware. A decade later, a tournament was even held at Stanford University, in a room plastered with posters condemning Nixon and the Vietnam War. Remarkably, it was not the first attempt to re-purpose military funds from within. In 1958, William Higginbotham, a physicist who worked on the atomic bomb and later became a leader in the non-proliferation movement, devised *Tennis for Two* – a sports simulation, designed on computers intended for calculating ballistics. One can only imagine the response of his superiors when it was finally unveiled at his laboratory’s annual visitors’ day.

Another story relates to Ralph Baer, an engineer who redirected the resources of his 500-man team to build a console

that could be connected to a television set. Filing out patents under the name of his employers at Sanders Associates, a company supplying the US military with sophisticated technologies, Baer told his managers nothing and during the summer of 1966, laid the groundwork for the Magnavox Odyssey, which made history in 1972 as a commercial gaming platform.

The origin of video games then, is linked to a technoscientific cognitariat<sup>8</sup> that America's powerful defence corporations failed to control. Through channels like the Advanced Research Projects Agency, vast sums of money entered research centres in a bid to steer the first mass draft of immaterial labour<sup>9</sup> in the US towards preparing for a nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union – and we have video games because a little of that money was misappropriated and put to better use.

### Building socialism through the arts

Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining the military's interests in the gaming industry, and how it was able to exercise its influence so quickly. By liberating computers and video games from the Pentagon, hackers inadvertently set the stage for their 'reterritorialisation'<sup>10</sup> by capital in pure commodity form.<sup>11</sup> This, and the associated cultural hegemony, superincumbent over all conceivable forms of virtual play, is not going unopposed. Assemblies of immaterial labour have long resisted, and continue to resist, the insipid commodification of art as well as its overall subjugation to neoliberalism.

After the 1960s, there came the creatively unmanageable developers at Atari who, in the 1970s, during the Golden Age of Gaming<sup>12</sup>, drove studio executives mad.<sup>13</sup> Then came the suspect subculture of *Manga*<sup>14</sup> artists who revived Japan's burnt-out American industry in the 1980s, followed by the internal and external pressures of female players and industry workers on male-dominated networks in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup>

Later, into the 21st century, we have the advent of modding<sup>16</sup> communities and teams of micro-innovators reshaping video games as a provocative and independent force. This increasing level of autonomy, energised to no small extent by the availability, affordability, and accessibility of development tools, is empowering 'indie' studios and attracting working-class artists; frustrating attempts to stifle outside opinions while compounding existing tensions within, with regards to unionisation and an inchoate class consciousness. The pace of technological progress, accelerated by the ruling elite's blind pursuit of wealth and their ideological aesthetic, has, paradoxically, left this cultural bastion vulnerable to attack. Even in the early days of gaming, corporations struggled to leverage the creative talent of immaterial labour. Now, the capitalist class is insisting its gravediggers take up the shovel.

The situation is particularly acute owing to the simple fact that, unlike film and literature, video games can achieve massive popularity and commercial success without significant financing from distributors or publishers. Service platforms such as Steam afford blanket coverage for all titles and additional coverage based on sales, acting as an online storefront for a 30-40% share of revenues and a small charge. Their principal competitor, Epic Games, offers a similar service for a 12% cut and no fee. This arrangement means that video games disseminating alternative views can reach mainstream audiences.

In addition, time-honoured tendencies from other artistic disciplines can be adapted and redeployed. Social and Socialist Realist video games are already appearing on the market.

There are also those that educate players in Marxist theory; sometimes passively and sometimes with a clear didactic intention. Both can be constructive. The same may be said for the retro appeal of predominantly Soviet design, music, language, and symbology. To take a case in point, I have heard from several comrades that *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2*<sup>17</sup> was an early influential factor in their political development. This should come as no surprise. Many of us will have been introduced to the concept of socialism through the arts.

In 2019, the subject of Marxism and video games was put firmly on the table in an event that took the gaming world by storm. At a crowded auditorium in Los Angeles, during an acceptance speech for the Fresh Indie Game Award, developers of the breakout hit, *Disco Elysium*, gave a passionate shout out to "some of the great people that came before [them]"; a roll call that included Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Soviet singer-songwriter Viktor Tsoi, and Russian painter Vladimir Makovsky. It was an impressive speech, especially as it came from a team responsible for earning approximately £43m worldwide.<sup>18</sup>

Elsewhere, studios operating as workers' collectives are also gaining media attention. A year after *Disco Elysium*, an American profit-sharing group founded Pixel Pushers Union 512 and released *Tonight We Riot* – a side-scrolling 'beat 'em up' where you play as a crowd of revolutionary workers, hurling petrol bombs and taking on the state. Although as subtle as a sledgehammer, its aggregate review score on Steam is rated 'very positive'.<sup>19</sup> Video games such as these are, however, an exception rather than the rule. To suggest otherwise is to ignore the direct and indirect 'militarisation' of the industry; not only by national governments and armed forces but also by arms manufacturers.

In the UK, attempts to bring gamers into the military's fold are openly acknowledged and play a part in recruitment propaganda. The British Army's latest advertising campaign demonstrates this perfectly with posters reading: "Binge gamers, the army needs you and your drive."<sup>20</sup> In reality, video games themselves are working as a primer. Many sanitise and glorify modern warfare, normalising violence while promoting nationalistic notions of who our enemies are. This usually involves framing 'good guys' as freedom-loving US special forces and 'bad guys' as generic Middle Eastern terrorists. Or Iranians. Or nowadays, the Chinese or Russians.

As a video game developer myself, I have seen first-hand how studio executives will push false narratives and politicise creative content. Anti-Marxist sentiments are often mandated from above and historical events are regularly revised before being insidiously presented as fact. Combined with this, for the sake of authenticity, game writers and designers are routinely paired with military consultants, who can prove instrumental in pandering to conservative paranoias. Moreover, video games have also been targeted for product placement by major gun companies, who hope to reinforce their brand identities and have their merchandise showcased in realistic combat scenarios. In this respect, video games are appropriated as interactive promotional materials. Senior developers and stakeholders are approached and courted by arms dealers. They are taken to factories and firing ranges, made to feel like 'real soldiers', and, in some cases, outside the UK, paid off with samples, taking home assault rifles to their families. A few studios even collaborate with the military to further long-term business plans, leasing in-house software for training purposes.<sup>21</sup>

But once again, there are countercurrents. In 2011, Polish developers at 11 Bit Studios launched *This War of Mine*, a survival game focusing specifically on civilian experiences of conflict. Aside from winning more than a hundred awards, it also made a tangible difference in the world by raising over £400,000 for the charity, War Child. Similarly, two projects I have worked on while contracting for the Czech studio, Bohemia Interactive, have sought to introduce players to International Humanitarian Law through the 2013 military simulation game, *Arma 3* – generating nearly £300,000 for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

### Oppressive ‘crunching’

This then, is to describe something of the battle for ideas. But what about those battles affecting game developers in the workplace? Compulsory overtime is almost expected in the industry. Known as ‘crunching’, it is a cost-cutting exercise that can lead to 80-hour weeks for extended periods of time, without extra pay.<sup>22</sup> This frequently results in ‘burn-out’, a catch-all term to describe the myriad health problems occurring when studio employees are pressurised into working day and night in stressful circumstances. I can testify to this from personal experience and have been compelled to crunch for months on end; once, for 96 hours straight. I remember how team members were invited to bring sleeping bags to the office and how, every morning, an anxious producer was forced to step over exhausted bodies to reach my desk.

Situations like this are not uncommon. In 2004, the fiancée of a game developer at Electronic Arts wrote a damning online article, describing how her partner was coerced to work 12-hour days, seven days a week, month after month, “with the occasional Saturday evening off for good behaviour (at 6.30pm)”.<sup>23</sup> Her furious invective, charged with obvious concern and despair, made headlines around the world and shocked many; principally because, within the industry, such hours were not considered shocking at all. Depressingly, not much has changed. According to a 2022 study, 58% of game developers in the UK have experienced crunching within the last two years.<sup>24</sup>

Aside from this gruelling practice, thousands of others also face sex discrimination, bullying, and sexual harassment. In the words of a fellow freelance narrative designer, Meghna Jayanth:

“[It’s] a toxic confluence of worker disempowerment and a male-dominated managerial class [that makes game development] an especially unwelcoming place for women. [The industry] sits at the intersection of the worst of the casting couch, predatory networking culture of the entertainment industries, and the unregulated boys-club mentality of Silicon Valley. There’s an entire culture of silence, complicity and even enabling toxic behaviour.”<sup>25</sup>

This assessment, I would add, is an accurate one. Reports of improper conduct against female employees are often dismissed by upper management. At some studios, disciplinary action is even avoided unless an allegation of rape is made – anything less being blithely put down to ‘office hi-jinks’.

Of course, workers have not been idle in resisting these conditions. Over the years, many high-profile cases have appeared in the press and inspired efforts to establish unions. In 2018, a British chapter of the international Game Workers Unite union was legally recognised as a part of the Independent

Workers’ Union of Great Britain (IWGB). The first labour association in the country to represent the interests of game developers, its goals are to end unpaid overtime, to educate and protect targeted workers, to improve inclusion and diversity, and to establish fair and regular wages. In practical terms then, the familiar question of ‘what is to be done’ may be easily answered. Those of us developing video games in the UK should join the Game Workers branch of the IWGB and encourage others in the industry to do the same, while championing and sharing information on the organisation’s campaigns. Political education and further reading should also be considered; especially *Marx at the Arcade* by Jamie Woodcock and *Games of Empire* by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter. Both books are recommended, for they are very accessible and offer a much richer insight than the one afforded here.

### Tackling cultural hegemony

On the subject of our response to capitalist cultural hegemony and video games, we must strive towards a more daring and creative solution. The way ahead is open. Now is the time to advance a radical agenda. To educate, agitate, and organise. To fight back, as artists – real artists, leveraging the power of virtual play with passion and integrity. Not alone but together, as Marxist game developers. To do this, we have to combine our skills and resources and establish at least one video game studio, run as a workers’ collective for peace and socialism. Such an undertaking will be an ambitious endeavour. It will require experienced and dedicated comrades. But it will also require outside support; namely, from the Game Workers branch of the IWGB, and Communist Parties internationally. In truth, we are at an exciting point in history. The ruling classes, in an impulsive attempt to secure and further the runaway profits of the gaming industry, have left the gate of their falling castle unguarded. By spurring automatised software, generous government subsidiaries, and free digital distribution services, they have unintentionally provided us with the means to confront a social, political, and economic status quo. If we can rise to this occasion we will set an incredible precedent and liberate ourselves from a dominant, bourgeois ideology.

■ This article was first published on the **Culture Matters** web site at <https://tinyurl.com/5dvuptsc>.

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- 7 J Woodcock, *Marx at the Arcade*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2019, chapter ‘A History of Video Games and Play’ (pp 11-33).
- 8 The term ‘cognitariat’ refers to a collective work force, employed for

- immaterial labour, especially within the information technology sector. It relates to the production of 'intellectual capital'.
- 9 The idea of 'immaterial labour' was coined by the Italian sociologist and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato in his 1996 essay 'Immaterial Labor'. It provides a Marxist framework to describe how value is produced from affective and cognitive activities, which are commodified in capitalist economies in various ways.
  - 10 'Reterritorialisation' is a restructuring of a place or territory that has experienced deterritorialisation. For example, when the Spanish conquered the Aztecs, and after they had deterritorialised the Aztec culture by destroying their ritualistic and sacred symbols, the Spanish then embarked upon a phase of reterritorialisation that saw the introduction of Christian rituals and beliefs. The concept of 'reterritorialisation' was devised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their philosophical project *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972-1980).
  - 11 N Dyer-Witheford and de G Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2009.
  - 12 The 'Golden Age of Gaming' relates to arcade gaming and a period of rapid growth, technological development, and cultural influence, from the late 1970s to the early 1980s.
  - 13 Dyer-Witheford & de G Peuter, *Games of Empire, op cit*, p 12.
  - 14 *Manga* is a Japanese art style, initially popularised through comic books and graphic novels, typically aimed at adults as well as children.
  - 15 Dyer-Witheford & de G Peuter, *Games of Empire*, p 18.
  - 16 'Modding' refers to the process of making changes to computer or games software or hardware. 'Modding communities' are often leveraged by video game developers as 'playbor', increasing the value of commercial products through unpaid labour, undertaken freely by video game consumers as a form of play.
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# LETTER

Readers might be interested to hear of our Communist Party branch's monthly online *Communist Review* discussion group.

In an ideal world the Branch would have a comrade willing to take the lead in organising a wide-ranging programme of political education. But in the absence of a comrade willing to take on that role, we agreed late last year to establish a monthly online *Communist Review* discussion group.

On a regular evening every month between 6 and 12 members of our branch take part in discussion of an article chosen at the previous meeting. Usually, the comrade who suggested the article chosen introduces the discussion of it, but we have been fortunate sometimes to have the author of an article agree to join us.

Phil Katz introduced discussion of his article on Historical Revisionism, and Sean Meleady introduced his article on Xi Jinping and China's 21st-century Neo-Maoists. For our next meeting, Arvinder Kandola is joining us to introduce discussion of his article in *CR108*.

We find that discussing the articles together deepens our understanding of the issues they cover and puts the magazine more at the heart of our Party life.

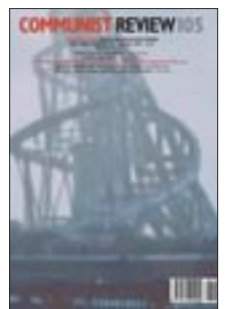
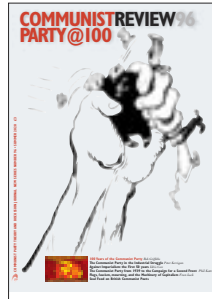
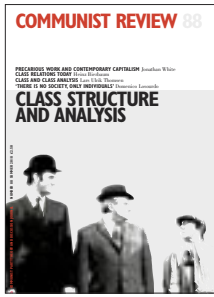
A group like ours is really a collective endeavour that pretty much runs itself and I wonder if other Communist Party branches might enjoy setting up groups of their own.

**Geoffrey Ferres,**

Communist Party Oxfordshire & Berkshire Branch

# COMMUNIST REVIEW

Journal of theory and discussion



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# APRÈS MOI, LE DÉLUGE: GAMBLING IN THE 21ST CENTURY AN ONYMOUS



‘In short, I think it would be fair to call the gambling business what is clearly is: theft. The only thing that makes it not a criminal enterprise is that it is legal to do it. It produces no saving or time for customers, gives them no products and no services, yet it relentlessly takes funds off customers, because they can be robbed as a group with great efficiency. Money moves between customers, and a very large chunk is removed by the entity which organises that movement.’

I HAVE RECENTLY left, after a number of years, what is often unironically called the gaming ‘industry’, where I was primarily a programmer in football betting. The ‘industry’ part of it often reflects the fact that it is now a ‘platform’ industry, with ever increasing power and sophistication which the ‘customers’ face – behind the screen of flashing lights and tempting offers are banks of servers, algorithms, programs analysing huge flows of customer data and making real-time changes, artificial intelligences, affiliate programs, as well as human account managers who have the same, single, goal of all capitalist enterprises: make a profit.

I came to this ‘industry’ quite by chance: I was thrown out of work by the recession starting in 2008, when a wave of creative destruction ripped through what I could sell, and my abilities with computers had some potential elsewhere. That same recession had also prompted me to read and re-read quite a bit of Marxism. I knew something was up with the system that had destroyed my career, and I wanted to know what it was as well try to earn money. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the internal workings of the gaming ‘industry’ and to suggest an analysis of some of its mechanics. The maths needed to grasp gambling (and indeed to program for it) are no higher than GCSE level; you just need to pay a little bit of attention to what is happening.

### The maths for matches

In gambling, the first thing to be aware of is a fairly simple calculation which is known as the ‘bookmakers’ overround’. Essentially a bookmaker will generate a set of ‘prices’ for the outcome of a football match. These are often quoted as ratios (eg 2 to 1) but are best understood in the decimal form. For example, a football match can have three outcomes: the home team wins, the away team wins, or it’s a draw. There are other outcomes such as the match being abandoned, not played or otherwise declared void, but for nearly all football matches there are only these three outcomes: one team will win or there will be a draw.

Let’s say that we have a fairly even match, and the prices quoted are 3.2 for a home win, 3.2 for a draw, and 2.0 for an away win. This means that a punter (and they generally are called punters rather than clients or customers for reasons which will become clear), coming in with £10 and placing it on a home win will get £32 back if it comes in, but nothing if either the away team wins or it ends in a draw. On the face of it, this looks like a good bet, as there is at least double the money on offer than if the away team wins. However, this collection of

prices also tells you in theory how much the bookmaker is intending to make out of this match, and in theory what the probability of the outcomes is.

Because all the possible outcomes, home win, away win or draw, represent all the possible outcomes, the probability that the match will end in home win, away win, or draw is certainty, or 1. To get an idea of the probabilities and to work out the bookmakers overround we need to take the reciprocal of the prices, as in Table 1:

**Table 1: Example prices, calculation of probabilities and outcome of betting for a football match**

	Home Win	Draw	Away Win
Example price	3.2	3.2	2.0
Reciprocal	0.3125	0.3125	0.5
Percent value	31.25%	31.25%	50%
£ placed from £112	31	31	50
£ payout if win	99.2	99.2	100
True probability calculation	31.25/112.5	31.25/112.5	50/112.5
True probability	27.7%	27.7%	44.4%
True price	3.6	3.6	2.25

Ultimately this shows us that the probabilities are 31.25% for the home win, 31.25% for the draw and 50% for the away win. You’ve probably spotted the issue with this already. The total probability for this adds up to 112.5%, one and an eighth. This figure is the bookmaker’s overround and it is commonly expressed as a percentage or a figure greater than 100. Any figure greater than 100 basically guarantees a profit on the basis of probability. The eighth here is the bookmaker’s planned profit.

Assume that there are 112 customers all with £1 each. A first basic principle of betting is that punters will attempt to back a winner: they will put their £1 on the outcome they think will win. With a match like above, we can use this to follow the probability (with a little bit rounding), of the 112 punters: 31 will put their money on a home win, 31 will put their money on a draw, and 50 will put the money on an away win. All three outcomes together are certain: it will be home or away win or a draw; but in reality only one outcome will be true. Let’s break it down again, as also shown in Table 1.

So if the home team wins, the payout is £31 x the price, 3.2. It’s the same for draw, and if the away team wins the payout is £50 x 2.0. In all instances the payout is as near as dammit

£100. However, the total amount staked is £112, leaving a clear profit of £12, or the next eighth, to the bookmaker. So in theory, in a market where each player bets according to the probability, it doesn't matter what the result is, the bookmaker takes a slice of the funds. All that needs to be done is move the money around from losers to winners and take a slice.

In a perfect market, the outcome is predetermined. 112 people will place £1 each and £100 is repaid to the customer. Does this look like a scam? That's because it is. Interestingly, this is also the *optimum* bet. If you have one customer with £112 who wants to both maximise *and* guarantee the highest return regardless of actual outcome, they would have to place £31 on a home win, £31 on a draw and £50 on an away win. With any variation on that, the minimum amount returned drops significantly, as Table 2 shows.

**Table 2: Winning/losing outcomes (£) on different distributions of £112 bets**

Money placed on ...			Return if result is			Minimum Guaranteed Return	Net Gain (Stake - Minimum win)
Home win at 3.2	Draw at 3.2	Away win at 2.6	Home	Draw	Away		
11	31	70	35.2	99.2	140	35.2	-76.8
21	31	60	67.2	99.2	120	67.2	-44.8
21	21	70	67.2	67.2	140	67.2	-44.8
31	31	50	99.2	99.2	100	99.2	-12.8
31	41	40	99.2	131.2	80	80	-32
41	41	30	131.2	131.2	60	60	-52
51	41	20	163.2	131.2	40	40	-72
61	31	20	195.2	99.2	40	40	-72

In short, a customer who wants to maximise *and* guarantee his return is in effect minimising his losses rather than maximising his return. This also minimises the gain to the bookmaker, but nonetheless, there is a gain.

Is there a way we can reconfigure this market so that it is fair? That's possible too. We can work out the true probability just by using the same figures and rather than using 100% as the denominator, we use 112.5% and then take the reciprocal again to get to the true price, as also shown in Table 1. As we can see, these prices are all significantly higher than those of the original quoted prices. And in this case you should get £27.70 on a home win and the same on a draw, and £44.40 on an away win. In these instances a total of £100 has been staked, and each outcome will pay out £100. In this case the bookmaker's overround will be 100 with no profit or loss.

Once you have hundreds, if not thousands, of these prices, the more the outcome starts to hit a statistical average, or the law of large numbers, which guarantees that in the long run the results will reflect underlying probability. Take a million punters, with a million prices, over a few days: the law of large numbers will start to kick in, and there will be money left over in the bookmaker's profit. A bookmaker may lose on a single bet, but in the long run the pattern is in the maths, and it is inevitable.

However, bookmakers aren't only making £12 for every £112 they move around. What they hold onto is significantly more than this, and that's simply because not all bets are on a single outcome. More often than not, money is staked on several different outcomes in what is often called an accumulator or multiple bet, where all the predictions have to be correct for the bet to pay out. So let us say our punter places a bet on three matches with the same prices as above. All three predictions have to be correct. If the punter decides to bet on a home win for all three, the price payout becomes 3.2 x 3.2 x 3.2 for a win.

This is a massive 32.8 times the stake. However the actual probability has become 1 in 47, as there are 27 possible combinations (eg HHH, HAD), each with its own probability. As the prices are multiplied, so is the bookmakers overround which in this case becomes 142.5. That is, of every £142.50 spent on this particular triple, the probability is that the bookmaker is planning to hold on to £42.50.

If we summarise this in a sentence it is this: the bookmaker pays out less than they should, given the actual probability of the event happening; and the riskier the bet, the better it is by multiples for the bookmaker.

We need to cover a little bit of probability here. The prices given reflect, but are not an absolute (or even accurate) measure of, probability. These would have been generated in bygone days by compilers, people with an accurate knowledge of and access to sporting statistics. For example, let us say you have a good team playing at its home pitch against a team in the same league, and in order to generate a price you need to work out what is the probability that it will win the match. You could take the results for their last 10 matches at home in the same league (you want conditions to be as equal as possible so you limit your search) and you find out that it has won 7 of the matches, lost two and drawn one. With no further information you could say that there is a 70% chance of a home win, a 20% chance of the visiting team winning, and a 10% chance of a draw. Taking the reciprocals to generate 'true' prices, we get 1/0.7 = 1.42 for home win, 1/0.2 = 5 as the price for the visitors winning it, and 1/0.1 = 10 as the price for a draw. We then multiply the probabilities by our desired overround to get, for example, 0.7 times 1.12 = 0.78. This generates a bookmaker's price of 1.27, significantly less than the actual price for a home win.

This is a very simplified example but the object of compiling probabilities is to get them as accurate as possible, and doing that would also entail (for example) looking at the performance of the visiting team when playing away (eg say they win 50% of matches when playing away which would temper the high probability for the home team), and also at head-to-head performances of the two teams. Using these three sets of statistics alone, it is possible to generate probabilities which are reflected in the actual prices quoted; while professional generators will also use various distributions to generate probabilities of goals scored by teams. Human adjustment might be needed, for example taking into account the signing of a new player, who will be fielded on the day, or if any player is off or has problems, all of which can be assigned numerical values by looking at historical differences and professional judgement. To make it more complicated, bookmakers also check out their competitors' prices to see if they have a different view on the outcome, and adjust accordingly, giving an oligopolistic flavour to the pricing.

Added onto this is the fact that the technological revolution has made crunching the statistics stupendously fast and drags in very large amounts of data, allowing continuous adjustments to be made. If, for example, a bookmaker can see that a lot of money is going on one particular outcome before the match has kicked off, the prices can be tuned down for new bets, or bets can be refused entirely. If the bookmaker spots a particularly 'unbalanced book' – where the money appears to be going on, say, a home win more than the probability states that it should be – the price for a home win can be adjusted down to reflect this, making it less appealing to new customers looking for the same bet.

In short, the individual punter is trying to make judgements which are superior to stupendous calculations being made

behind the scenes by armies of computers examining not only huge datasets but live data including actual bets placed by *all* the customers, factoring in competitors' prices and human adjustment for circumstances, and doing so in a set-up where the optimised outcome for the customers together is identical with the customers minimising losses. We must also bear in mind that, while the examples and explanations given above refer to a single match or at most three matches, the betting 'industry' is not particularly interested in a single match: there are literally hundreds or thousands of sporting events a day, and each one can be used to generate an unlimited number of probabilities of outcomes, all of which can be offered to customers as propositions.

On average, in the business I worked in, I reckoned that in a month, the business would pay out about 60% of the money it took in, yielding a gross profit of 40% of turnover. That is an extraordinary rate of return for what on a day-to-day basis is basically moving money around: taking money from and paying money to the punters.

Can the bookmakers lose? It is not unknown – but it is rare – for all the favourite teams to win without an upset. Money pours out to the winning customers, but they often stake it back in an attempt to win more, and then lose it. From my experience in the business I would say: it was likely for the bookmaker to have a losing day, when more went out than came in; it was possible to have a losing week when there was a net outflow to the customers; but it was unheard of to have a losing month (once in my career we more or less broke even) and in a year impossible. In the fullness of time, with millions of prices and millions of bets, the bookmaker is protected by the law of large numbers which ultimately kicks in, even if you start off with an exception. However, this is not the only protection that they have. What the laws of probability tell you is that unlikely things are not impossible, they just don't happen very often. *Watford v Manchester United* might be a 10 to 1 bet but this doesn't mean *Watford* will never win, it means that *Watford* definitely will win, just 1 in 10 times. The basic maths above of the bookmaker's overround shows that in the long term, it doesn't matter who wins.

### The winners

Clearly, when more money is supposed to come in than goes out, the bookmakers pay a lot of attention to winning tickets, especially big ones. Over time they might spot punters who are beating the odds. What these guys do is spot mistakes. With literally thousands of prices covering all sorts of events, sometimes the computers make a mistake. Sometimes the market changes rapidly, for example, a key player is ill (or hungover) which materially affects the market for that match, and the bookmaker's system hasn't caught up in time. The bookmaker is still offering the price from before that condition, and a lot of money suddenly comes in on the offered outcome; say its price is 4.5 but the new information says it should be price 3 and it hasn't been adjusted quickly enough. Maybe some human somewhere has made a mistake and a decimal place has been dropped. Even if only 0.01% of prices are mistaken, they are still there and people spot them or are actively looking for them. Occasionally, company insiders are manipulating prices and surreptitiously placing bets on them.

At this stage the bookmaker makes serious provision to protect the firm. There are many options to choose from, often contained in the terms and conditions that everyone has to sign up to on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Commonly there is a maxi-

mum payout of 1,000, or 10,000, times the stake, but that's not always understood. I have seen some customers placing bets with a true probability well in excess of this, eg a bet with a true probability of 10,000 to 1 on an outcome which would only pay 1,000 to 1. Sometimes a maximum payout is specified, say £1m. Other restrictions in the terms and conditions, which a player implicitly accepts when playing, can, and do, include the bookmaker having the right to:

- cancel any bet, at any time, without giving a reason;
- suspend or close an account, at any time and for any reason;
- use the 'correct' price, after the event if they make a mistake;
- view certain transactions as suspect, fraudulent, or criminal and cancel them without giving any reason;
- stay court proceedings in favour of 'independent' arbitrators.

Ultimately, bookmakers also have the right to cancel an account if it is not 'economically viable'; *ie* if you win more than you should, and they think it is likely you will continue to win. I have met a number of these players and they tend to be banned from bookmakers' shops and websites, and they use different identities to bet. One professional I knew specialised in spotting bad probabilities in greyhound racing and hired several gentlemen to sit in bookmakers' shops in various parts of London with phone earpieces to place the bets he directed; he himself was known and banned. Another guy used to 'buy' identities for, say, £50 and then use the identities to set up betting accounts until they were shut down. In short, if you win, or are too clever, they will try to shut you down. Ultimately this has also resulted in some notable court cases for 'genuine punters' where the bookmaking company has simply refused to pay a winning bet. Not many customers are prepared to fund a private prosecution, especially given the resources they will be up against.

### The losers

You would think that putting yourself up time and again against a business which has access to huge information resources, creates a playing field stacked against you, ultimately protects itself through terms and conditions and lawfare, and where statistically the only thing you can optimise is minimising your losses and if you are lucky enough to win big, you're likely to be shut down – all this is the very definition of insanity. The punter is trying to get more of the company's money (which comes from other customers), and the company is trying to get more of the punter's money. It is an unequal battle the punter cannot at any stage be expected to win. *En masse* the customers are facing a financial machine which charges interest every time they put their money in it, every time they visit. But the punters still come, and, clearly, for the company, the punter who loses is the very life blood of the business.

Logically the punters who lose money should rationally look at the choices they face and not bet. If an emotionless automaton were given the command to maximise its money, only a broken one would approach a gambling website. However, the gambling business knows this too well: the entire business is based on lost bets. If customers did not lose bets there would be no business. The £3.1 bn in tax revenue collected by the UK government, bet365 CEO Denise Coates's salary of £249m, all the wages of all the betting company staff, the IT teams, the compilers, customer managers, and all the services they buy in, start as money in the customers' pockets. All of it is originally from the customers. Lost bets pay for everything. Even those customers who win are paid from the proceeds of lost bets. As I used to remind staff who worked in the business: treat your wages with the greatest of respect because they are soaked in

the tears of lost bets. Indeed, on one occasion of business planning, I suggested the key mission statement of the company should be “We are engaged in legalised theft via the manipulation of the expressed probability of the outcome of sporting events.” It really is that obvious on the inside.

How do you get people to do something as insane as continuing to throw good money away? There are all sorts of things including what is embedded in the process of betting. Placing a bet makes you visualise the outcome: you will have hundreds if not thousands of pounds to solve problems or treat yourself. It is exciting, perhaps you can't even sleep. The betting companies will insist that this is a 'leisure activity' (which is odd, as it's a financial risk transaction based on irrelevant false probabilities), something to be done like going to the pub. When a match ends and the betting customer who won is screaming about his winning, the losers simply screw up their tickets and drop them on the floor. The winners are always shouted about – the company might print off a big cheque and advertise it themselves; but the losers are ignored. No one sends cards saying congratulations, you have just lost a massive bet and thank you for supporting the company and contributing to the tax revenue.

### Psychology

Advertising often makes backing your team mean something that you do with your money, not only with your season tickets and your passion. Customers often back their teams, but of course, not all bets lose. If everyone lost 100% of their money all of the time it would without doubt end very quickly as reality bites and the rent goes unpaid and the supermarket isn't visited.

You definitely don't want a customer who is capable of only one bang and then is bust. As much as the company is desperate for losers, it needs winners too. I reckoned about 1 in 10 bets where I worked would be a win for the customer without any intervention. Often the win would be quite big. But not all customers would want the money back in cash immediately – some would leave some or all of it on account to bet with again later. For those that did withdraw it, it would come back in a day or two, or even within minutes, to bet on something new.

Psychologically the customer would write off previous losses. If they lose 10 bets of £10, and then win one of £50, the lost £100 is mentally written off, and the £50 win is highlighted. Most gamblers I met insisted they were slightly 'up' against the company, mostly through mentally writing off previous losses. I explained that to customers whose account history I knew, but they still insisted they were winning, or that the 'big one' was around the corner.

Wins are misrepresented: let's say our £50 win was the basis of putting £25 on a bet at the price of 2 to 1. The first £25 is just your money back but the whole amount will be called a 'win', by the company and the punter alike. The company's strategy to maximise its profits must be to keep the customer repeating the behaviour. To a great extent, it doesn't care what the customers bet on; the law of large numbers rules and the company just wants more bets.

The company is very aware that it has to keep people going. It uses individual psychology such as writing off former losses, or worse, chasing a loss, where the customer is aware of the losses and is waiting for that lucky day and big win to come in to solve all the problems. As part of the psychology, the company will generate wins and 'things like wins', which are still subject to the exact same rules of probability as described above.

The first and simplest thing I programmed was a bonus cal-

culator which had a relentless logic. I generated a list of customers who had played in the previous week, added up the money they had put in, and then subtracted the money they had taken out. Say that one punter had put in £1000, taken out £500 and had £100 left on their account (which they could withdraw or bet – at this point it was just liability) and to be safe I'd remove this too, meaning they had put in £400 more than they took (or could take) out in the week. 10% of this is £40 and there is your loyalty bonus. The customer, not keeping an accurate personal account, and having written off the losses, sees this as a genuine bonus.

From the lost bets I generated money to circulate around, and this would be timed for the weekend with an encouragement for the upcoming sporting activity and a wish of luck. We didn't care really what bets the customer had placed, it was clear that we had more of their money than they had of ours; and to make ourselves look good, and to encourage more betting, we gave out a bonus.

Most companies who do this also make the 'bonus' in a non-cashable form. The punter can't withdraw the money, meaning that the money often never changes hands at all, going back into company coffers, from which it never left in the first place. This reinforces the behaviour of betting, extending the number of times you can be 'lucky'. It is one way of producing the mental image of money for nothing, which is in truth anything but.

'Accumulation insurance' is another virtually identical promotion, and is still done according to the iron-clad laws of probability. Typically this offers a return on a losing bet if it 'only' loses by one or two choices. Normally these have to have a minimum number of selections, with a minimum total probability of say less than 1 in 10, and then if one selection misses, the bet is refunded or paid at a lower price. Similarly, 'full cover bets' allow a spread of risk for both the customer and the bookmaker – bets otherwise called a Heinz, Patent, Yankee or Goliath,<sup>1</sup> where the bet is permuted out and the stakes placed on different combinations of the selections. In many of these instances the customer would get a return, most often much less than his stake, but it gave the illusion of 'winning' something. We had one customer proclaim on social media that these sorts of bets were impossible to lose, but in reality we were in most instances returning £10 from a £100 stake. Cashing out bets prior to the matches ending works on a similar logic, levelling out the risk in favour of the company.

Throughout, the behaviour of consistent loss of bets is reinforced through controlling the winning by using terms and conditions to control those who win from time to time, and by bonuses or offering softer options for those who lose more consistently. I do remember considering what might be the gold standard, for the sort of manipulation we wanted to achieve and this was to make sure that every new customer who joined our platform was a winner with their first bet. We would then become their 'lucky company', and get more repeat business from the same customer. The only way I could see to do this would be actually to change the bet itself, which was a step too far and open to lots of exploitation if customers caught on. But watch out for it, it might come one day.

One of the most important things was the socio-economic background of the customers. Those with little money would place tiny bets with massive odds in the hope of generating a lottery-style win, and thus bets which would pay out massively less than their true probability and hit the hard limits programmed in, even when they did win. Wealthier customers would still place big bets but all of them had problems to solve

which would be improved by having more money. The more desperate customers with problems were the best. One of those problems was losing money gambling, but with the hopes just round the corner. Customers sometimes got desperate and asked for loans to bet with. From previous experience, loaning was a bad idea. If a company lends £100 and the punter bets and loses, then they now just owe the company £100 before they can place a new bet. The punter will just disappear. The company loses a customer as well as a fictional £100 that was already in the bank. So, often the company will use a 'grants not loans' policy which, again, is informed by allowing a customer to 'get back' 10% of what had been lost.

We had one customer who had lost a fortune, and one day he got in touch to say he was stuck somewhere with no money and could we loan him some money. Because of account-based betting it was possible to see exactly who had lost what amount of money, and in this instance it was unproblematic to give him a grant of £1000 and worry about it later. It would take much longer to try and get that money back when we already had £30,000 more of his money than he had of ours. It was a drop in the ocean, but it made us look generous and caring, no doubt he would tell his friends. A more experienced bookie once put the proposition in very clear terms: "Let's do some scheme where they get a free TV for every £1m they lose".

### **The business model**

So, here we have a business model that relies on people losing money. But they can't lose 100% of the time or they will stop; and they can't win too much because it will break the company. None of these companies has a gold mine or an oil well behind them to fund their payouts; it's all done from the same pot of funds which are in the customers' hands. But equally, the relentless driving logic of the business is the requirement for lost bets. The issue is to how to balance that out and hide that basic truth – in short, the business requires, as a minimum, repeat behaviour. Let's spell this out, as what it requires is repeat behaviour where that behaviour is financially negative for the customer. It requires people to commit (financial) self-harm on a regular basis. That is the business basis of gambling, and it is diametrically opposed to what the gambling business is asked to do when it says be gamble-aware, or take stock, or wait until the fun stops. If that was the genuine aim, then customers really would stop. In reality the promotions, bonuses, accumulator insurances and early cash take-outs are simply to reinforce the proposition that you can win or get money from nothing but your participation in predicting sport results, and there's a big one round the corner, fear of missing out.

Operating on this, of course, is a lot of business intelligence. There will be analysts with their access to data, Pareto models<sup>2</sup> which isolate which customers are the most profitable, as there would be with any business. Market segmentation will allow customers to be targeted by whom and what they bet on. 'Who are our biggest customers? How can we upsell them? How would we stop them going away? Critically, how can we get them to continue their behaviour?' These customers will 'benefit' from account managers with some discretion over bonuses, non-financial prizes such as tickets or experiences, and probably near daily contact with an individual at the firm whose sole job is to keep them onside and spending money on bets they mostly lose.

There have been a fairly large number of newspaper articles and some very light-touch regulation on dealing with these customers. What that ignores however, is that this is not a flaw in

the gambling business, it is in fact how it is designed to work. It is not even a feature which applies only under certain circumstances. It is normal operation, what the drive to profit requires. A gambling business has business imperatives. Asking it to turn away the customers who generate the most profit is business suicide; the customers would probably just turn to a competing firm. Prioritising the customers' financial position, let alone their mental health, is against the whole point of the business. Customers vulnerable are customers valuable. An attempt to regulate or ameliorate this is doomed; it is in the DNA of the business to encourage net losses, repeatedly, as long and as big as possible. If the punter steals the money and loses it, the theft was committed by the customer, not the company. You might as well try to regulate wild lions into vegetarianism, or to make water flow uphill from time to time, with about the same expected level of success.

### **Some reflections on value**

There are a number of other fairly unique characteristics of the gambling business that set it apart from other more traditional business models. First to ask is, what is being sold? Is there any way that a 'bet' can be called a commodity or a service? It is certainly not a commodity. A bet is a proposition of contingent risk, between a client and a bookmaker, which is proposed only on the bookmaker's terms. Once bookmakers decide the price for an outcome, whether it is decimal 1.8 or 7 to 1 on, they create a prospect of risk, both to the bookmaker (who must pay out if the customer wins) and to the customer (who must lose their stake if they lose). The relationship is unequal. It is the bookmaker who creates the odds, and also must have the stake before a bet is on.

With the prices decided, no other input is required than the transaction and receipting; the same bet can be sold infinitely without incurring any other cost than transaction expenses. This is not like a loaf of bread as the input is literally a mathematical construct, rather than flour and yeast. The level of risk can be adjusted to fit. The bookmaker can change the price at will for new customers, and can also refuse to take more bets. A bookmaker suspicious of the sporting event can cancel the bet and only has to return the stake. There is literally nothing of any physical nature in a bet other than an exchange of money. It is a transaction in itself; there are no additional input costs in terms of commodities or labour, other than for receipting the transaction.

Can it be called a service? A service normally presents a lower cost pathway for a consumer to achieve something, exploiting the efficiencies of division of labour and specialisation, whether that be from a lawn-mowing service or a solicitor. It will, in most instances, present a lower cost to the consumer; that which is more expensive to do oneself will generally be replaced. In modern economic theory the consumer would weigh up the cost of their time and input in doing something (or even learning to do something) against hiring a specialist to do it. If it was to their advantage and the means were present, the rational consumer would choose the specialist. In short they would save themselves critical resources (time, money) in hiring the services.

How does this work in betting? It would be possible for a customer who wanted to back an outcome on a football match to find someone else to back the opposite outcome on a football match, and agree the terms. In fact, in its simplest form you can have two people betting on the outcome of a coin toss. One player backs heads with £1 and the opponent backs tails with

£1. The winner wins the other player's £1. In fact the price here is 2, for each option. If the two players played against a bookmaker they could both back heads but the price would be 1.9. Interestingly the involvement of a broker here (the bookmaker) makes the returns less while allowing more options.

It's more complicated in betting companies, and sports are more complex than coin-tossing. Indeed, there have been various attempts at creating platforms which put together customers backing different outcomes (for a fee). In such a configuration we might well find prices which are closer to true probability and the 'market', such as it could be called, would be fairer. Theoretically there should only be costs relating to the putting of the two parties together and of registering the transaction and perhaps holding funds in escrow. However, apart from various practical issues which might arise (there might not be enough people backing the outcomes for there to be an 'opposite' of the bet placed), one feature is immediately obvious: it's a zero-sum game. One party wins and one party loses, money is transferred between the two and no-one has saved anyone anything, not even potentially time, as the time spent finding someone prepared to lay the bet one is backing is, by definition, wasted in a zero-sum game. If we take into account transaction costs, then both parties have lost marginally, as in any practical scenario less will come out than went in. In this model, no party benefits at all, it's just mugs looking for mugs with the arrangement exploited by mugs.

This is why we have punters rather than customers or clients. Both customers and clients expect to gain from a transaction. But a punter is engaged in behaviour.

So, if a bet is not a commodity, and lacks the essential qualities of a service, what is it? How do we describe a proposition of risk alone, which can be sold endless times, and which at best is simply going to shift money from one party to another? No-one is getting a loaf of bread out of it or getting their lawns mowed.

In almost all other situations where a group of customers did not get what they expected, all of the transactions could be disputed, possibly even in group litigation – whether it is the builder who promised a brand-new garage but delivered only half of it, or the baker who made no bread but took payment. But there's no solidarity in gambling. The punters are actually betting against each other and the bookmaker; the winner one day is the loser the next. In this situation, by moving funds between customers and keeping a healthy slice for themselves, bookmakers are able to rob customers far more effectively than they could rob one customer who saw where all the different funds were going.

In short, I think it would be fair to call the gambling business what is clearly is: theft. The only thing that makes it not a criminal enterprise is that it is legal to do it. It produces no saving or time for customers, gives them no products and no services, yet it relentlessly takes funds off customers, because they can be robbed as a group with great efficiency. Money moves between customers, and a very large chunk is removed by the entity which organises that movement.

This has implications for how a company might relate to surplus value. It is important to ask how 'value' moves through a betting enterprise. I suggest that gambling companies do not create any value, surplus or otherwise. The money they take is mostly from wages, thus adding more pressure on workers who already get less than the value of their labour. There are no products and no services. The punters get their own money through their work, mostly in the form of wages, and some of the more

broke may start stealing the value that others create, or start borrowing it. A customer goes to work, gets paid and then gambles. This money could be used for all sorts of purposes – education, housing, food, children – but this money in the long term will end up in the hands of the betting companies. It will pay for its workers (cashiers, programmers, cleaners, account managers) and then go to the shareholders. It might be a moot point that the workers in a betting company 'create' value by creating systems that move money. But they create it out of what? Does a thief create value? The betting company simply gets money from people using the processes described above, produces no good, social or otherwise, and redistributes the money upwards. It starts to look very similar to raising a tax for private purposes.

A water company provides water, a baker provides bread, an engineer makes things work, even the stockbroker provides advice and the politician provides a focus for organised groups and access to legislation. What does the bookmaker provide? Simply the ability to extract money on a grand scale. It is easy to see here why in so many cultures gambling has been considered a social evil, and even in those cultures where it is permitted it has been heavily regulated.

Governments should have a clear concern with a business whose normal functioning is extractive only, which transfers money away from its customers in exchange for nothing of social value and which in fact delivers a fair amount of social harm to its customers. The brains behind the betting platforms and the vast array of digital machinery that run these businesses are geared to making people do irrational things repeatedly. Similarly to the way the best brains of a generation were spending their time trying to make people click on adverts online, the not insubstantial brains behind the gambling business are engaged in getting people to continue to hand over their money. It looks very similar to taxation, although undertaken by a private company for its own gain rather than for the social good.

The gambling business creates no value, in any form. Its purpose is to encourage financially damaging repeat behaviour from a large number of punters, and to redistribute this money according to the laws of managed probability between those customers and itself. Vulnerable customers are the best customers, crimes committed by the customers are not the crimes of the company. It is impossible for the punters together to make net gain from gambling. The business operates like a taxation on the behaviour of vulnerable people making choices which are financially bad for them, and it carefully closes down punters who spot mistakes. These are not flaws in a business model which can be regulated, they are part and parcel of the business itself, part of normal operation. The gambling companies have a lot of money, and use that for influence and to capture their own regulators.

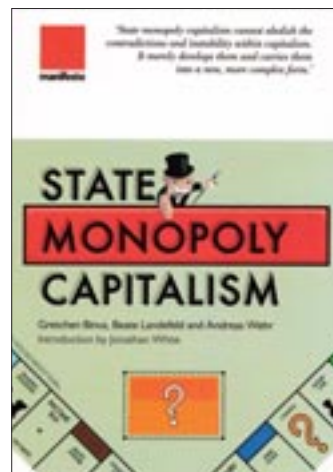
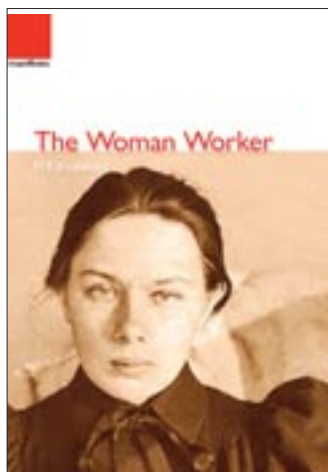
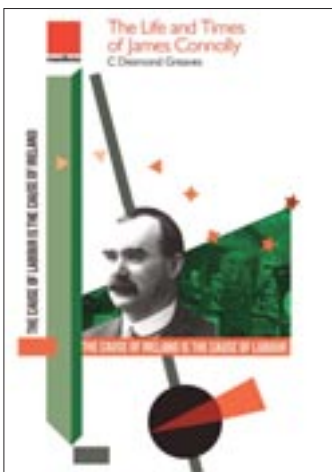
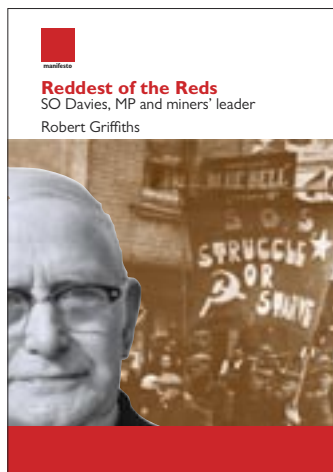
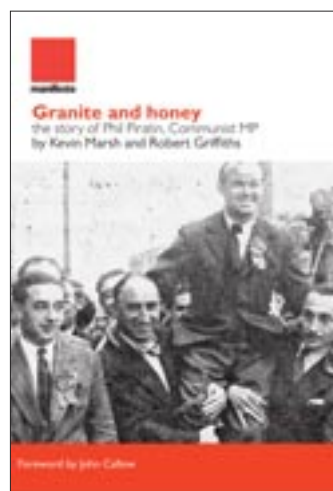
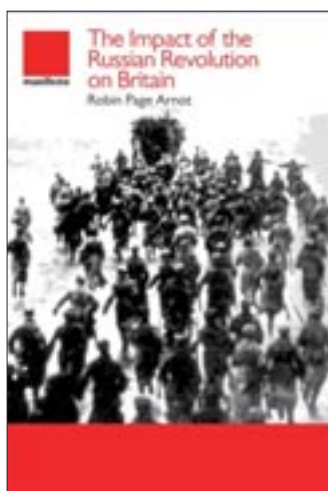
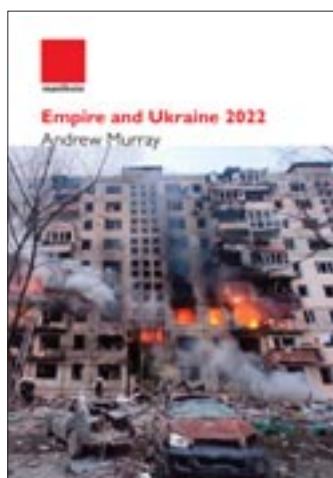
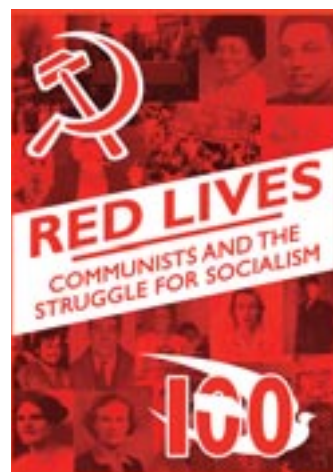
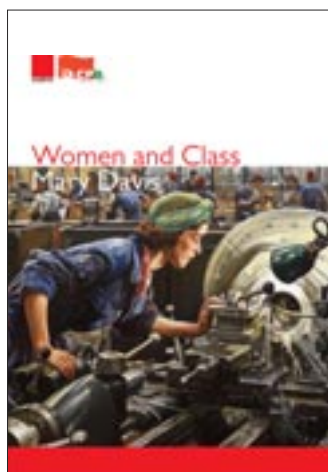
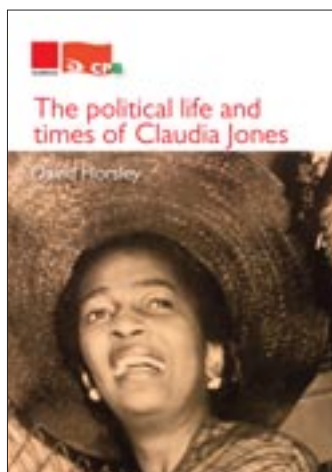
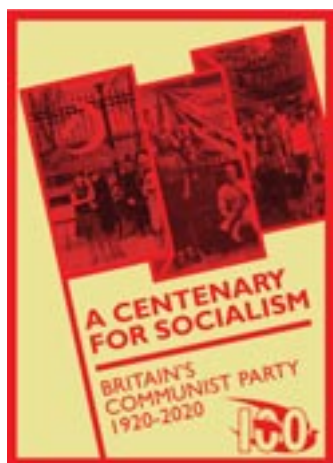
Karl Marx's attribution of the watchword of capitalists, "Après moi, le déluge",<sup>3</sup> aptly describes the business that chews up its source of money. There are only two ways forward for the gambling business: nationalisation or prohibition.

- The author is a Communist Party member but their identity is withheld to protect employment prospects.

#### Notes and References

- 1 For details see <https://tinyurl.com/yc2739aa>.
- 2 The Pareto principle, applied in many areas of society, says that 80% of the outcomes arise from 20% of the causes, see <https://www.thepunterspage.com/pareto-principle-in-betting/>.
- 3 Marx, *Capital*, Vol 1, Part 3, Ch 10, Sect 5; in Marx & Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 35, p 275. The phrase is actually ascribed to King Louis XV of France.

# COMMUNISTS/REBELS/ FEMINISTS/AGITATORS/ THINKERS/WRITERS/ TROUBLEMAKERS





# THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY JAMES CROSSLEY



‘What is now needed is a new generation of critical Marxist historians to develop a thoroughgoing account of the emergence, development, and influence of the Jesus movement and earliest Christianity, and locate their place in a historical materialist account of the past and lingering influences in the present, whether reactionary or progressive.’

WHO OR WHAT is ‘the historical Jesus’? Put crudely, the historical Jesus is the figure historians reconstruct from behind the embellishments, mythmaking, and ideas attributed to him that took place after his death. From the best sources we have, a full biography remains impossible. What historians have instead attempted to do is assess the extent to which it is possible to reconstruct the words and deeds of the figure who was active in Galilee and Judea sometime around the year 30 CE.

While there has been a steady, if underappreciated, tradition of western Marxist scholarly analyses of Christian origins, there has been very little on the reconstruction of the life of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> This is remarkable given how significant the quest for the historical Jesus has been in Western thought since the end of the eighteenth century. Before we turn to why Western Marxist analyses are relatively absent and what a Marxist analysis might look like, a brief overview of the early days of this quest and its ongoing influence will be provided.

### The Quest for the Historical Jesus

The most influential challenges to the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts came from Germanic scholarship. The conventional starting point has traditionally been the work of Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), an Enlightenment thinker born in Hamburg. Reimarus’ fame in historical Jesus studies is due to extracts (*Wolfenbüttel Fragments*, hereafter the *Fragments*) posthumously published by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Reimarus had kept his more provocative views quiet during his lifetime and Lessing likewise kept the authorship of the *Fragments* anonymous, such was the explosive nature of their content. The two most relevant *Fragments* concerned the purpose of Jesus and the disciples (published 1778) and the resurrection narratives (published 1777), both of which made sharp distinctions between Jesus and Christianity and critiqued inconsistencies in the New Testament texts.<sup>2</sup>

For Reimarus, Jesus was a reformist figure at home in the Judaism of his day who preached repentance before the imminent coming of the kingdom of heaven, in much the same way as John the Baptist had before him. Jesus’ recognisably Jewish teaching involved, Reimarus argued, simple, humble, trustworthy, peaceable, merciful, ethical, and inward-looking pious behaviours, and the prioritisation of loving God and neighbour. On Reimarus’ reading, Jesus did not seek to start a new religion and did not look to introduce any new articles of faith. Reimarus’ Jesus did not want to do away with Jewish religion or practices such as sacrifice, circumcision, purity, or Sabbath.

Rather, it was the emerging church after Jesus’ death which distanced itself from these practices.

Similarly, Reimarus claimed that Jesus took on various messianic titles but that these should not be confused with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity which was a later development. When Jesus used the term “Son of God”, he was doing so in a way recognisable to Jews of his day, namely that it was a term employed paternalistically to refer to a person or people beloved of God, including a prophetic or kingly figure.

For Reimarus, when Jesus referred to the kingdom of God or heaven this too was a recognisably Jewish concept which involved the expectation of a kingdom established among Jews and expressed through their laws and with an understanding of God as their king. It was a concept that anticipated a future glorious kingdom in Jerusalem brought about through the Messiah when the Jews would be freed from the Roman yoke. And so, when Jesus entered into Jerusalem with his followers at the festival of Passover (Mark 11; Matthew 21; Luke 19), Reimarus suggested that this was seen as stirring up rebellion against the rulers and led to his death at the hand of the authorities.

This expectation of political redemption led to disappointment after Jesus was killed. The apostles then moved away from this hope for a powerful redeemer of Israel and developed a doctrine of humanity’s suffering saviour. Reimarus’ critique of the historical validity of resurrection accounts were part of his explanation that they too were a response to the unanticipated problem of Jesus’ premature death.

The publication of Reimarus’ *Fragments* effectively inaugurated the quest for the historical Jesus, at least as a sustained serious intellectual enterprise. The historical Jesus was now to be viewed firmly in his original historical context. The extent to which he was different from (or similar to) the church that emerged in his name became a standard feature of theological scholarship by the end of the nineteenth century. But this was still controversial throughout the nineteenth century, especially through the work of the Protestant theologian, David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74). In 1835-6 Strauss published *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*), which became most (in)famous for the argument that the miracles were a part of Christian mythmaking, later additions to the Gospels which should be removed from a critical understanding of the life of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Such was the scandalous nature of this argument that it cost him his position at the University of Zürich.

Today, the ideas of Reimarus, Strauss and others are not controversial, even if we might dispute the details and even if

their approaches look dated in light of advances made in the analysis of the Gospels. Disputes now typically vary over what type of figure Jesus was (social critic? end-times prophet? wisdom teacher? progressive liberal?) but are built on the foundations of late-eighteenth and nineteenth century scholarship. We should see figures like Reimarus and Strauss as representing significant advances in the study of history and human society, not least because they helped open up areas of study once off-limits.

We should also see the controversies their theological and historical works provoked as part of a wider struggle of their time. We should understand these scholarly advances as part of the consolidation of bourgeois power of the late-eighteenth century and nineteenth century, gathering momentum in the build-up to, and aftermath of, the American and French revolutions and their consequences. As has been argued in detail by Dieter Georgi and Halvor Moxnes, for instance, the most famous European biographies of the “earthly” “human” Jesus the “great man” were a product of bourgeois nationalism which challenged the presentation of the aristocratic, divine Christ of the old feudal order.<sup>4</sup> Two centuries later, this bourgeois legacy is continued in liberal scholarship which has come to dominate the quest for the historical Jesus, particularly in North America. For all the differences of scholarly opinion, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on Jesus the great individual who acted with supreme agency.<sup>5</sup>

### A different tradition

While the Germanic bourgeois publications of the nineteenth century and their successors in liberal scholarship up to the present receive most attention, there were significant developments taking place elsewhere, including in emerging working-class and dissident circles. These reconstructions of Jesus were likewise critical of the presentations of an aristocratic, divine Christ of the feudal order but there was another tendency which turned this ‘human’ Jesus against bourgeois dominance. In Britain, this understanding owes much to Thomas Paine who, in *The Age of Reason* (Part I published in 1794; Part II in 1795), controversially argued that the Gospels were written many years after the purported events and not by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and not by eyewitnesses. In addition to criticising the historical plausibility of miracle stories, he argued that the Gospels were contradictory, distorted, and anachronistic accounts. About as much as we can know of the historical figure of Jesus, Paine suggested, was that he was a preacher of the “equality of man”, opposed to priestly corruption, and likely advocated the freeing of the Jewish people from Roman rule. After Jesus’ execution on the grounds of sedition and conspiracy, later (non-Jewish) Christians created a mythological system whereby this Jesus was elevated and deified.

The *Age of Reason* was cheap and found a sympathetic audience among labourers, artisans, and radicals.<sup>6</sup> The influential Paine-style understanding of Jesus was then taken up in reaction to the economic hardships following the Napoleonic Wars, such as by Thomas Evans, a follower of the revolutionary Thomas Spence.<sup>7</sup> Paine’s Jesus was also a major reference point for Chartists in the mid-nineteenth century. But Paine was not the only writer on the historical Jesus whom the working class were reading. In 1845, Engels wrote that socialists were active in the education of the working class in England, including in the supply of cheap translations of French and German literature.<sup>8</sup> One such publication, he said, was Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*.<sup>9</sup> The cheap, serialised translation was

circulated in the early 1840s and associated with the journalist and radical dissenting Christian, Henry Hetherington. This translation has been largely ignored in the historical scholarship and overshadowed by the English translation of the fourth edition by the novelist George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) in 1846. Whereas Eliot’s translation was for a dissenting middle-class audience, the Hetherington version was squarely aimed at the working class,<sup>10</sup> which goes some way to explaining why one has since been remembered over the other.

This working-class audience for and interest in historical Jesus studies has been overlooked despite plenty of material being available in the Chartist press and its precursors in the 1830s. Of course, some Chartists were more theologically radical than others but there is a consistent picture of Jesus that emerges from the newspapers, often at odds with the politics of the more conservative liberal Strauss. This Jesus of working-class interpretation was from a labouring or poor background who identified with his own kind. He was critical of exploitation, hypocrisy, tyranny, and the rich. Jesus’ opponents were typically understood in class terms too. Opposition from priests and other groups were categorised in near timeless class-based terms (middle class, upper class) as first-century equivalent of politicians, aristocrats, and church authorities (of varying denominations) in the nineteenth century. Against such class-based opposition, Jesus the Chartist-style martyr was said to have put up a dignified front, emphasising egalitarianism, virtue, morality, humility, discipline, and neighbourliness. It was believed that Jesus met the typical fate of the benevolent reformer – persecution and execution – but not everyone thought that he passively accepted his fate. Sometimes Jesus was in line with those Chartists who emphasised “moral force”; at other times he was more menacing and in line with those Chartists who emphasised “physical force”.<sup>11</sup>

Whether right, wrong, or somewhere in between, we should see such late-eighteenth and nineteenth century reconstructions as a significant development in what has become a recurring popular understanding of the historical Jesus as a radical, oppositional, even revolutionary figure. Yet the relative absence of prominent scholarship on Jesus in the Western Marxist tradition over the twentieth century is even more striking against this backdrop. There nothing like the equivalent of, for instance, the influence the British Marxist historians had in university-based history departments. This dearth of comparable scholarship is likely due to the serious study of the foundational figure of Christianity having been located in university theology departments and theological seminaries where, particularly during the Cold War, the hostility towards Marxism (assumed to be atheistic and reductionist) has been most acutely felt.

Consequently, for all the disagreements among scholars, the resulting portraits of Jesus have typically been idealistic to an extreme degree. There is a dominant tendency portraying Jesus as a great man of history who simply turned up and shaped the world around him, and whose ideas and actions had little connection with socioeconomic changes happening at the time. Even when there have been attempts to locate Jesus in a world of economics and social structures, these have usually been carried out to highlight his supposed theological distinctiveness or to engage in debates about whether the Galileans were especially oppressed, thereby setting the scene for Jesus to provide a radical theological alternative.

This needs to be countered. The once thriving class-based analysis of the historical Jesus of the late-eighteenth and nine-

teenth century needs to be revitalised, updated, and developed further by Marxist historians. A historical materialist understanding of Jesus in a world of competing class interests obviously turns such idealistic, liberal, or neoliberal readings of Jesus the great man on their head. But before we turn to these issues, it might be helpful for readers unfamiliar with how we go about reconstructing the life of Jesus to have an outline of how we might go about this task.

### Sources

The best sources we have for Jesus are probably all from the first century in the decades after his death (c 30 CE). While there is some potentially useful material in the letters of Paul (eg 1 Corinthians 7.10-12), the payoff is limited, as Paul's concerns (as far as we know) were elsewhere. The best materials available are the New Testament Gospels, or rather the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The Gospel of John presents Jesus as an elevated figure to the extent that he was in some ways equal with God (eg John 5.18; 10.30-33) and who was executed after he raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11.38-57). While the other Gospels have their own theological agendas, they do not reflect these ideas which were part of theological speculation at the end of the first century onward rather than from closer to the time of Jesus. Moreover, John's explanation for the death of Jesus obviously did not happen. Whatever the historical accuracy of the other Gospel accounts, the claim (for instance) that Jesus was put to death for turning the tables of dove-sellers and moneychangers at a tense, busy festival in Jerusalem (Mark 11.15-18) is at least a more plausible explanation than a story about raising someone from the dead.

That leaves the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The Gospel of Mark is widely accepted as the first Gospel and a source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew and Luke also share very similar material that is not found in Mark which has led to the hypothesis of a shared (but now lost) source which scholars have labelled 'Q' (from the German *Quelle*, meaning 'source'). It has also long been argued that Matthew and Luke additionally had independent sources. This is the standard explanation for understanding the Gospel sources, although there have been regular challenges to the consensus, such as (among others) the claim that there was no lost source and that the similarities between Matthew and Luke can be explained by the argument that Luke copied Matthew. This is a huge area of scholarly debate and I simply note that my own preference is something like the conventional model, while being open to the idea that Luke may have also known Matthew. Sometimes, additional sources from the second century (eg non-canonical Gospel of Thomas) are invoked, but it is not clear that they add much to the understanding of the historical Jesus.

From this, scholars have tried to develop a set of criteria (the so-called 'criteria of authenticity') designed to take us back to the historical Jesus. For instance, the 'criterion of multiple attestation' usually involves the argument that, if an idea or theme is found in independent sources which do not involve copying one another (eg Mark and Q), and in independent forms contained within (eg parables, sayings, conflict stories), then we are close to the historical Jesus. These criteria have come under heavy criticism over the past decade and rightly so. At most they can tell us which themes might have been popular and which might have predated the Gospels. But they cannot tell us if we have got back to the words and deeds of the historical Jesus because we do not have enough independent,

early data.

Instead, it is better to think in general terms about establishing early themes and ideas that were most likely associated with Galilee and Judea around the time of the historical Jesus while accepting that we cannot know whether Jesus said or did what was attributed to him. For instance, the claim that Jesus predicted an imminent transformation of the world is most likely early. Already in the mid-first century, there were concerns that millenarian predictions were not being fulfilled (eg 1 Thessalonians 4-5) and by the second century there were explanations given to why earlier predictions had not happened and reinterpretations of these predictions were provided (eg John 3.3-8; 21.20-23; 2 Peter 3.3-10). It seems likely, therefore, that early on there were authoritative predictions of imminent transformation of the world (eg Mark 1.15; 9.1) which generated such eschatological enthusiasm.

An emphasis on broader, early themes also forces us to think less about Jesus the great man and more about the broader social context of the movement associated with Jesus. It is for these reasons that I regularly use the term "Jesus movement" to describe the people responsible for the earliest traditions about Jesus, a framework which has the added benefit of highlighting the collective nature of, or support for, these ideas. Grounded in the approaches briefly outlined above, I want to give an outline of what we can say about the earliest ideas associated with Jesus, why this movement and these ideas emerged when and where they did, and how class interests are crucial for understanding the rise and continuation of this movement. I have, along with Robert Myles, provided a fuller argument in our recent book, *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict*.<sup>12</sup>

### Jesus in Galilee and Judea

Jesus was from a small village in Galilee called Nazareth and likely a labourer of some kind. As he was growing up, there were urbanisation projects in Galilee which brought about some important changes to the life of Galileans.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the nearby town of Sepphoris was rebuilt following an uprising and Tiberias was a newly built town named in honour of the Roman emperor, Tiberius. The urban elites extracted resources and surplus from the surrounding countryside which, in the case of Sepphoris, included the village of Nazareth. The innovations in Galilee put greater demands on the peasantry and redirected key resources towards places like Sepphoris. There has been an often-misguided discussion about the standard of living in Galilee at this time with scholars debating whether these changes provided lucrative employment opportunities for Galileans or impoverished them. The reality was more complex, however, and traditional ways of life were clearly changed. For a start, the first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, noted that in Tiberias there were people removed from their land while land was gifted to others.<sup>14</sup>

There is discussion in the Gospels of the breakdown of households which likely comes from what was happening in Galilee (eg Mark 3.31-35; Matthew 10.34-36, paralleled in Luke 12.51-53 and Gospel of Thomas 16.1-4; Matthew 10.37, paralleled in Luke 14.26). It is striking that this tradition includes the idea of Jesus' movement forming an alternative household. This was not to critique the ideas of the traditional family – this would not have worked well in an ancient agrarian setting – but instead familial language was the obvious communal language to mimic and address the breakdown of households.

There were established, if limited, vehicles for discontent and agitation in Galilee, as in so many pre-capitalist agrarian settings: banditry and millenarianism.<sup>15</sup> Banditry ranged from targeting those thought to be responsible for exploitation through insurrectionism to basic gangsterism. Millenarianism offered a fantastical vision of a transformed world to come and a promise of punishment for unjust rulers, elites, and their supporters. Banditry and millenarianism were not mutually exclusive categories, not least from the perspective of the ruling class. Jesus' likely mentor, John the Baptist, was a millenarian prophet, but the local ruler Herod Antipas took no risks when a large crowd of followers amassed in the wilderness and simply had John the Baptist killed as a violent insurrectionist.

Jesus' fate would be similar as his movement likewise took the millenarian option, most famously expressed in predictions of the coming "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven." This phrase could equally be translated "empire of God" as it was the same language used of the Roman Empire. This was not an egalitarian vision of the future, as is sometimes romantically presented, not least on parts of the left. It was a hope of a supernatural intervention understood in light of traditional peasant values and the Jewish scriptures – a widespread view which is also found in Josephus' explanations of first-century popular millenarianism.<sup>16</sup> The conceptualisation of a new world reflected peasant understandings of hierarchy with a just king and a core group of elevated members who would have pride of place in a restored Israel, judging who was saved and who was damned. This expected Golden Age was conceptualised as a theocracy which would replace the Roman Empire and their puppet rulers, dispense justice, and ensure a bountiful existence for those saved. With tongue only partly in cheek, we might demystify the phrase "kingdom/empire of God" further and think in terms of the "dictatorship of the peasantry", *ie* an expectation of a transformed world that would be run in the interests of the peasantry – again a view which would have chimed with what we know about first-century popular millenarianism from (for instance) Josephus.

Jesus took on the role comparable to the more rebellious lower clergy of medieval Europe, namely mediating between the people and divine, with his authority owing more to popular support than endorsement from the official religious channels. This direct access to divine authority allowed Jesus (and comparable figures like John the Baptist, to name the most famous) to challenge the current state of class relations. The Jesus movement may not have been egalitarian in the strict sense, then, but it still envisaged a world turned upside-down. There is an early tradition of role reversals in the world to come (eg Mark 10.17-31; Luke 16.19-31) which stressed that poorer and non-elite sections of Jewish society at least were going to be among the beneficiaries and that those deemed rich would have to give up their property and wealth if they were to be saved.

In this respect, it is striking that Jesus was remembered as being criticised for associating with tax collectors and "sinners". Beyond the Gospels, tax collectors had a reputation for being greedy and exploitative.<sup>17</sup> "Sinners" likewise. Again, the popular (and even scholarly) myth that "sinners" was a derogatory term for the poor, marginalised, and downtrodden, and that nasty Pharisees criticised Jesus for associating with supposed undesirables, does not hold up. I have collected the common words for "sinners" in the relevant languages over a period of several centuries before and after the time of Jesus, and this research shows consistent and clear patterns:<sup>18</sup> "Sinners" were deemed to be acting beyond Jewish law (or

interpretations of Jewish law), and whenever socio-economic status is mentioned, it is always in relation to them being exploitative rich people. The reason Jesus was criticised (or at least presented as such) was because these people were regularly understood to be cruel, lawless exploiters beyond redemption (but see also below).

Whether the Jesus' mission to the rich was successful is moot but it was part of an extended social network allowing the movement to survive and spread. For a start, connections with elite women, or women with resources, seem to have been important for funding this sometime itinerant movement (see, eg, Mark 15.40-41; Luke 8.1-3). Tax collectors and fishermen are noted occupations in the Gospels, and this is no surprise – as John Kloppenborg points out, tax collectors also interacted with fishing networks on the "Sea" of Galilee through taxation on catches and on boats which doubled up as transportation services outside busy periods.<sup>19</sup> Fishermen, we might add, were also a culturally credible, and economically crucial, group closely associated with the Jesus movement. These networks provided scope for the message to spread beyond the even more localised networks in Galilee.

The Jesus movement maintained its social credibility by emphasising the importance of traditional peasant values, strict morality, group discipline, criticism of elite values, and respectable interpretation of Jewish scriptures. It is telling that debates over the interpretation of Sabbath and purity laws tally with rural and non-elite interests. This included acceptance of plucking grain on the edges of fields on the Sabbath for sustenance (Mark 2.23-28) and downplaying the maintenance of ritual purity laws in all areas of everyday life (Mark 7.1-23; Matthew 23.23, paralleled in Luke 11.42; Matthew 23.25-28, paralleled in Luke 11.39-44; Luke 10.29-37) – a position that was associated with (among others) rural workers, some of whom were liable to become regularly impure through their work. Collectively, such interpretations of Jewish scriptures were an attempt to provide a dignified alternative amidst the upheavals in Galilee.

With John the Baptist executed, it is likely that the Jesus movement knew the risks of collective organising. They drew on Jewish traditions of martyrdom which were understood as sign of strength rather than weakness and believed to play a role in the expected transformation of the world (eg Mark 10.35-45; Luke 13.31-35, paralleled in Matthew 23.37-39).<sup>20</sup> This all came to a head in a final visit to Jerusalem at Passover. Passover was always tense, not least because it was a festival commemorating and anticipating freedom from subjugation. Indeed, it is possible that Jesus interpreted the Passover meal in terms of his expected execution and the imminent defeat of the Roman Empire through supernatural intervention (eg Mark 14.22-25).

In a packed Jerusalem, the authorities were wary of a riot, and the potentially volatile crowds (some of whom appear to have had sympathies with the Jesus movement) were aware of the fate of rioters. At the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus appears to have overturned the money changers and dove sellers in what was likely an attack on a religious-economic system some Jews thought to be corrupt (Mark 11.15-18). The Temple was a prominent part of the tributary system in Judea, which meant attacking it publicly was a dangerous enough act, but at Passover, even more so. This act led to the inevitable arrest of Jesus. The only real difficulty from the perspective of the authorities was how to deal with the problem without causing a riot. Jesus was eventually executed on a Roman cross as a bandit or violent insurrectionist – effectively for the same reason

other Jewish millenarians like John the Baptist were executed.

The typical fate of a victim of crucifixion was to be hung out as a warning and then slung in a pit. Some scholars have argued that this was the fate of Jesus. This is certainly possible, but it is also possible that there is some truth behind the story that Jesus was buried in the family tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was known to be wealthy and this burial, coupled with Jesus' known reputation as an interpreter of Jewish scriptures and a respected millenarian prophet, may have been a result of the mission to the rich.

### What happened next

Reconstructing Jesus' burial is speculative but, curiously, one area which is less so is that of sightings of the resurrected Jesus. From the mid-first century, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15.3-8) recalls how Jesus appeared to his followers or would-be followers, including Paul himself. This is an unambiguously early tradition associated with people Paul knew and part of a common enough cross-cultural phenomenon of people claiming to have experienced visions of some sort. The basic point is that some people believed that Jesus-the-martyr had been vindicated and accordingly elevated into some sort of post-mortem existence.

Certainly, claims to resurrection were important for the earliest followers of Jesus after his death and for the development of Christian theology. Nevertheless, such beliefs were not unusual for the time and are not enough to explain why the movement survived and spread. It is a common feature of emerging religious (and political) movements to grow through social networks (eg family, friends, workplace etc) and this applies to the emergence of Christianity. We have already seen how the movement began to grow beyond the Galilean peasantry through fishing communities and tax collectors, as well as through women with some resources and status.

This process continued on a wider scale across the Mediterranean world. Households, associations and workplaces continued to be important points of contact for the spread into urban centres with adherents from a range of backgrounds. Again, women as heads of household played an important role (see, eg Romans 16.1-2; 1 Corinthians 1.11; Colossians 4.15; Acts 12.12-17, 16.14-15). Women or girls would typically marry older men in the ancient world and when the husband died the wife might run the household. We also know that some women had the time and means to develop an interest in philosophical ideas and there is evidence of non-Jewish women in the eastern Mediterranean interested in Judaism.<sup>21</sup> This context provides some insight into the networks that were suitable for the spread of the Jesus movement in the years after Jesus' death.

Non-Jews interested in Judaism were important for the movement to attract more non-Jewish adherents. Jewish gatherings or synagogues were found throughout the Roman Empire and were unsurprisingly important points of contact for emergent Christianity. But synagogues also attracted non-Jews interested (in varying degrees) to Judaism. The Jesus movement already provided an ideological justification for incorporation of such people: the inclusion of 'sinners'. As well as the interpretation given above, the term 'sinners' was also a common shorthand for 'non-Jews' and was so because non-Jews in some sources were stereotypically associated with the conquering nations who might plunder Israel and were, by default, beyond Jewish law.<sup>22</sup>

With these connections in place, we can understand why

the movement rapidly had to deal with questions about its own identity: was this still a Jewish movement or something else? There were plenty of competing influences on new adherents. If they were in a synagogue, we can reasonably expect that they would have behaved in a way that did not offend their Jewish hosts. If they were in a trade association, in a workplace, in the army, or with extended family, they might behave quite differently where there were different social expectations, such as eating pork, eating food sacrificed to other gods, or working on the Sabbath. In the case of men, there was the problem of circumcision and there were debates as to whether it was required for a male convert to become a Jew.<sup>23</sup> In the case of families with competing external loyalties, this led to divisions within families (eg 1 Corinthians 7.12-16). In the case of enslaved household members, this would have involved compulsory conversion irrespective of personal beliefs.<sup>24</sup> Gatherings of the emerging Christian movement were a mix of people not just from different classes but from different ethnic backgrounds. Against this backdrop, figures like Paul emerged to provide theological solutions for pre-existing social and material problems involved in integration. For Paul (eg Romans 1-4; Galatians), circumcision and observance of Jewish law were no longer required (for non-Jews at least) and, for all the controversies Paul faced, this turned out to be a decisive move in the long-term development of Christianity as a non-Jewish religion.

Scribal or administrative roles were also necessary in the mediation (and thus spread) of the movement beyond its localised and parochial Galilean peasant setting.<sup>25</sup> This process likely involved village scribes and, as the movement spread, the ongoing writing and dissemination of texts almost certainly involved slave labour.<sup>26</sup> At this point, slavery was an assumed mode of production for the emergent Christian movement and was unlikely to be challenged in the present because the inherited millenarianism was both a fantastical resolution to social injustices and based on existing hierarchical models of social stratification. When Paul claimed, "There is no longer Jew or Greek [*ie* non-Jew/gentile], there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3.28), he did not mean the end of slavery or class exploitation, any more than he meant the end of male and female roles in everyday life. Rather, this was a justification of the reality of the social mix of people now involved in the movement.

From about the end of the first century, the Gospel of John represented an important development in Christianising the movement. As noted above, John's Gospel argued that Jesus claimed to be equal with God. However, the Gospel tellingly presents Jesus in opposition to "the Jews" who tried to kill Jesus for making such claims (John 5.18; 10.30-33). Whatever the nuances in the original context of the dispute between the writers of John's Gospel and their Jewish opponents, these stories were easily adapted into negative statements about Jews collectively and their alleged violent opposition to Christianity. This represented a step toward identifying Christian understandings of God as distinctly different from Jewish ones, as well as laying the foundation for later anti-Judaism and antisemitism.

Within three centuries, Christianity was sufficiently embedded in the Roman Empire to become its official religion. The longer-term developments in empire building, roads, transportation, and communication that had taken place in the ancient world over centuries were conducive to the spread of ideas of an overarching God covering – and justifying rule over – a range of peoples from different social and ethnic back-

grounds. The Christian version of this understanding was, in a less dramatic way, the expected realisation of the millennial and imperial dreams of Jesus and now intensified by Paul:

“[A]t the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2.10-11).

It was not difficult for the Roman Empire to co-opt such ideas for its imperial ideology.

### Marxism, Jesus, and Christian origins

A trajectory can be traced from the theocratic millenarianism of the Jesus movement in rural Galilee to the religion of the Roman Empire and then on to Christianity as the ideological justification for feudal relations in Europe followed by bourgeois power. But the movement associated with the historical Jesus had obvious differences from what followed. It was the product of shifting patterns of exploitation and land displacement in Galilee, acting in the interests of the peasantry and damning the rich who did not give up their wealth. What Marx famously said of religion in the introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* applies here: this was “the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering.”<sup>27</sup> These ideas did not disappear from Christianity. As it became the official religion of the Roman Empire and then feudal Christendom, so it also provided the main language of resistance, with some of this later absorbed into socialist thinking.

Historical materialist accounts relating to Christianity are prominent enough in scholarship. But the further back we go, and the closer to the historical Jesus we get, Marxist understandings have been less prominent. What is now needed is a new generation of critical Marxist historians to develop a thoroughgoing account of the emergence, development, and influence of the Jesus movement and earliest Christianity, and locate their place in a historical materialist account of the past and lingering influences in the present, whether reactionary or progressive. To paraphrase Marx, in his letter to Arnold Ruge, this must be a ruthless criticism of Christian origins, unafraid of both the results it reaches and the conflict it provokes.<sup>28</sup> It will involve dismantling some of the romantic, anachronistic but ongoing myths about Jesus the hippy, Jesus the liberal, Jesus the entrepreneur, Jesus the conservative – but also Jesus the socialist and feminist somehow ahead of his time, if only to understand what kinds of class relations exist in different times and places. This historical endeavour will understand the emergence of a movement in Jesus' name as one which takes seriously ancient modes of production, material conditions and changes of his time, and the accompanying class struggles, no matter how alien they may seem today.

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- 12 J Crossley and R J Myles, *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict*, Zero Books, 2023.
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- 14 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.36-38.
- 15 See the classic arguments of EJ Hobsbawm in *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Manchester University Press, 1959, and *Bandits*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969. Hobsbawm did not discuss ancient societies in any detail, but his work has been foundational for research into ancient agrarian unrest. See Crossley & Myles, *op cit*, pp 4-10 for discussion and references to ancient sources.
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- 17 Eg Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.150; Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.287, 292; *Mishnah*, *Nedarim* 3.4.
- 18 A summary of more detailed linguistic research is presented in Crossley & Myles, *op cit*, pp 116-121.
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- 23 See, eg, Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.34-48; *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer* 10. Compare also *Antiquities* 13.257-58, 318, and 15.253-54.
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- 27 Marx, ‘Introduction’, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.
- 28 Marx, *Letter to Arnold Ruge*, September 1843, available at [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43\\_09.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm): “ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.”

# BOOK REVIEW WITH SCALICE AFORETHOUGHT KEN FULLER



**The Drama of Dictatorship: Martial Law and the Communist Parties of the Philippines**  
By Joseph A Scalice  
[Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2023, 384 pp. Hbk/pbk/ebk: ISBN 97815017704-63/-97/-87, £130.62/£36.99/\$27.99.]

A FEW YEARS AGO, US academic Joseph Scalice published his doctoral dissertation, *Crisis of Revolutionary Leadership: Martial Law and the Communist Parties of the Philippines, 1957-1974*.<sup>1</sup> This examines the experiences of the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), founded in 1930, and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the Maoist group which broke away from the PKP in the late 1960s.

The CPP from its outset adopted a typically Maoist programme, advocating armed struggle and the surrounding of the cities from the countryside; while the PKP, although itself still illegal, worked through a number of legal mass organisations in the labour, peasant and student sectors. The one thing both parties had in common was the concept of the two-stage revolution: given the relatively underdeveloped state of the Philippine economy, there would need to be a national-democratic revolution, shaking off imperialism and, by means of nationalist industrialisation, laying the basis for a second, socialist stage. According to Scalice, this amounted to a betrayal of the working class.

## The missionary

Although a book based on his dissertation was planned, Scalice, being obviously eager to place his 900-page opus before a large audience, made it freely available on the internet. Why would he have done this? Why not await the appearance of the book? Pride in his academic achievement? Probably not, because a careful reading of the document reveals little justification for that. More likely, his search for an audience lay in the fact that Scalice is a man with an agenda, a mission. On his website,<sup>2</sup> he tells us that he accompanied his parents to the Philippines at the age of six; his was a missionary family, and at one stage he was himself a minister at a church in a rice-farming community.<sup>3</sup>

Nowadays, however, he has acquired a second religion that he is keen to propagate: Trotskyism. “It is well past time,” he says, concluding the first chapter of his dissertation, “that Trotskyism was given its own voice in the Philippines.” That would appear to be the major aim of his dissertation – one which seems to have won the approval of the University of California, Berkeley.

## An interest declared

At this stage, I should declare an interest. In his Introduction, Scalice claims that my own account of the Maoist breakaway from the PKP in the second installment of my three-volume history of the Philippine left<sup>4</sup> “is nothing but an apologia for the actions of Moscow and the pro-Moscow PKP.”

An apologia for the actions of the PKP? While it is true that I wished to correct several misconceptions concerning that party, I was also keen to ensure that my account was objective, and Scalice must surely have noted that on several occasions throughout the three volumes of the history I am critical of certain PKP positions. But Scalice goes further, claiming that I “depicted the split in an entirely one-sided and often dishonest manner, articulating without any critical distance or objective examination the positions of William Pomeroy, the leading theoretician of the PKP’s international ties.”<sup>5</sup> Feeling sure that Scalice would at some point attempt to justify this claim of dishonesty, I waded through the 900 pages of his dissertation, and found ... nothing. Not a thing.

Scalice points out in a footnote that in my Introduction to *A Movement Divided* I make no secret of the fact that the idea for the volume was conceived in the Pomeroy’s front room in Twickenham. Scalice’s intention, of course, is to suggest that the idea came from the Pomeroy’s, and that they may well have overseen the writing. As so often in his hostile claims, Scalice fails to provide context. That context was readily available, as in my Preface to *Forcing the Pace*,<sup>6</sup> the first volume in the trilogy, I explain that the idea for a book came to me during a series of discussions, led by Bill Pomeroy, on the history of the PKP. Nothing more than that. Neither Bill nor Celia Pomeroy saw a word of what I had written until I sent them a copy of *Forcing the Pace* upon its publication in 2007.

## Malice aforethought?

It would however be a mistake to take such treatment personally, because this, as we shall see, is Scalice’s method. Are his ‘errors’ and distortions the result of sloppy scholarship or has he, with malice aforethought, set out to hammer two ‘Stalinist’ parties, twisting the facts to suit his case? Either possibility might be true, although the Trotskyite faction to which he seems to be allied is notorious for its deliberate distortion of facts.<sup>7</sup>

For an example of one of Scalice’s more egregious ‘errors’, take the claim in his dissertation that Moscow sold arms to Indonesian leader Suharto with which to slaughter members of the pro-Beijing Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).<sup>8</sup> In his book, Scalice goes further and says that Moscow “embraced” Suharto.<sup>9</sup> None of this is true, of course. Soviet arms may well have been

used in the slaughter of 1965-66, but they had been supplied to the anti-imperialist Sukarno, who was in alliance with the PKI and was unseated by Suharto, following which relations with Moscow soured. With Suharto in power, says Dewi Fortuna Anwar, “Indonesia froze its diplomatic relations with China and kept other communist countries, including the Soviet Union, at arm’s length.”<sup>10</sup>

Scalice provides us with a clue by the language he employs to describe the players in his drama: he attacks the late Hernando Abaya, a decent anti-imperialist, for his alleged “hypocrisy” and “feigned incredulity” that the intelligence services should consider his involvement with Bertrand Russell to be subversive;<sup>11</sup> the mechanisms by which the PKP concluded its political settlement with Marcos in 1974 were, says Scalice, “implemented in the shadows by men skulking in the dark corners of history.”<sup>12,13</sup> This, surely, is the language not of an objective academic but of a political opponent.

### “Stalinism”

Scalice’s book has this year been published by Cornell University Press, and while it is considerably shorter than his dissertation, most of the ‘errors’ found in the latter have been left untouched.

Scalice aims to demonstrate that the failure of both the PKP and the CPP stems from their adherence to “Stalinism.” His dissertation employs the word Stalin or its variants – Stalinism, Stalinist – no less than 366 times; the book makes do with a mere 97 mentions. The “Stalinism” to which the PKP and the CPP fell victim, dooming their activities to failure, consisted, says Scalice, of three elements: “socialism in one country, the two-stage theory of revolution, and the bloc of four classes.”<sup>14</sup>

“Socialism in one country” was the issue upon which Trotsky fell out with the majority of the leaders of the CPSU in the 1920s. For a time, in the aftermath of World War I, it had looked as if international revolution would be possible; but with the defeat of revolutions in Germany and Hungary, and the counter-attack by the capitalist class in most developed countries, the revolutionary tide had subsided. The debate which then occurred in the CPSU was centred on whether it was possible to build socialism in the USSR (“socialism in one country”) while being virtually isolated from the West and without revolutionary allies.

The Stalin camp took the view that it was indeed possible, while Trotsky and his adherents held that “permanent revolution” was required. And this has been the position of Trotskyite fundamentalists ever since: to succeed, socialist revolution must be conducted on a world scale. The assertion put forward by some Trotskyites that “socialism in a single country meant socialism nowhere else”<sup>15</sup> is a crude distortion: it was not the case that socialism elsewhere was undesirable to Soviet leaders, but that it had proven impossible at that time; in practical terms, acceptance that socialism in one country was *not* feasible would have led to *no* socialism in the USSR. Although ultra-leftist in appearance, therefore, Trotsky’s position was objectively on the right.<sup>16</sup>

In order to embark upon socialist construction, a country must have reached a certain level of development, providing it with the material basis for such an enterprise. In less-developed societies, therefore, it is deemed necessary first of all to shed the domination of imperialism – foreign capital and its political and economic representatives; and thereafter, to undertake a period of nationalist industrialisation which, apart from providing the material basis for socialism, will also significantly expand the working class. This first stage of the “two-stage revolution” is referred to as national democracy; and the process is known as non-capitalist development as, although capitalism will be

allowed, it will be regulated by the state, now under the control of ‘national democrats’, and will not be permitted to develop fully. Such a program, says Scalice, amounts to betrayal, as the task of a revolutionary Marxist party should be that of educating the working class regarding its historic role, and mobilising it for the struggle for socialism. Appropriately, therefore, Scalice’s book carries an epigram from Trotsky, which begins: “All talk to the effect that historical conditions have not yet ‘ripened’ for socialism is the product of ignorance or conscious deception.”

The coalition which will gain control of the state and embark upon the national democratic stage of the revolution is envisaged as being drawn from the working class, the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie (that section of the bourgeoisie willing to take a stand against imperialism). This is the “bloc of four classes” which, Scalice alleges, merely subordinates the working class to a section of domestic capital. He argues that both the CPP and the PKP, by their support of different leading figures in the national bourgeoisie (Benigno Aquino in the case of the CPP, Ferdinand Marcos and, before him, Diosdado Macapagal in the case of the PKP) facilitated the imposition of martial law in 1972, the CPP by its “protracted people’s war”, while the PKP is alleged to have conducted a bombing campaign with the knowledge and support of Marcos.

This article is primarily concerned with Scalice’s claims and allegations concerning the PKP, as, unlike his treatment of the CPP, Scalice does not always cite sources, and those that are cited are often misleading.

### Lapiang Manggagawa

Scalice’s *Drama of Dictatorship* concentrates on the Marcos period, but his dissertation goes farther back and discusses the PKP’s relations with President Diosdado Macapagal (Marcos’s predecessor and father of the future president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo). This gives Scalice his earliest opportunity to attack the concept of the two-stage revolution.

In January 1962, the representatives of a number of rival Philippine trade unions decided to sink their differences and form a labour party. This, says Scalice, was an initiative by Felixberto Olalia and Pedro Castro, “both secretly high-ranking members” of the PKP.<sup>17</sup> While there is no doubt that the formation of the Lapiang Manggagawa (LM, Workers’ Party) was a PKP initiative, Pedro Castro had been expelled from that party as long ago as 1948, and this is, perhaps, an indication of the shallowness of Scalice’s knowledge of the PKP.<sup>18</sup>

Says Scalice:

“In the persons of Joma Sison and Ignacio Lacsina the party effectively controlled the newly founded Lapiang Manggagawa ... and using its immense working-class membership as political capital, they secretly negotiated a deal with the President. Wielding the promise of support from the LM membership in the heated 1963 mid-term election to secure Macapagal’s commitment to their ends, they struck a bargain with the ruling Liberal Party [LP]. By the middle of the year they merged the LM with the LP, and thus but months after its founding the Stalinist leadership ended the independence of the Workers’ Party.”<sup>19</sup>

Well, no.

As Scalice acknowledges, Macapagal had promised to complete the “unfinished revolution” of 1896. Was this merely empty sloganeering, or was Macapagal willing and able to pursue the national-democratic stage of the revolutionary process? The PKP decided, via the Lapiang Manggagawa, to put him to the test.

While it is entirely possible that the negotiations between the LM and Macapagal were conducted discretely, there was certainly nothing “secret” about the process or the outcome. And there was no merger. Instead, the LM and Macapagal’s Liberal Party entered a coalition. *The Instrument of Coalition*, drafted by the LM’s Ignacio Lacsina and signed by Macapagal, included pledges to root out corruption, adopt an independent foreign policy, implement land reform and adopt a pro-labour stance. The LM was intended to act as the voice of labour within the anti-imperialist coalition of classes which was thought to be emerging in the Philippines.<sup>20</sup>

The LM participated, along with other PKP-led mass organisations, in a number of important campaigns and mass actions in the mid-1960s. At a demonstration in October 1964, it called for the ending of “the state of economic subservience to American monopoly capital perpetuated by parity rights and preferential trade.”<sup>21</sup> Indicative of the LM’s growing disenchantment with its coalition partner, the manifesto issued at this demonstration insisted:

“Instead of joining the jockeying of presidential aspirants to be the ‘American boy’ in the ensuing election campaign, President Macapagal is called upon, as the duly chosen leader of the nation, to step forward and offer a sustained and resolute leadership to the emerging forces of national freedom and progress.”<sup>22</sup>

The following January, a further demonstration issued a manifesto calling for the ending of parity rights for US investors, the immediate abrogation of the military bases agreement, the Filipinisation of retail and wholesale trade, the immediate implementation of the Agrarian Land Reform Code, abrogation of the Military Assistance Pact with the USA, full respect for civil liberties (possibly a coded call for the legalisation of the PKP), a full-employment strategy, an increase in the minimum wage, improved access to credit facilities for Filipino business, and the extension of diplomatic and commercial relations “with all countries willing to deal with us on the basis of equality and mutual respect in order to correct our narrow and neocolonial ‘special relations’ with the United States.”<sup>23</sup>

It is therefore obvious, contrary to Scalice’s claim, that the LM had lost none of its independence.

By this stage, it was clear that Macapagal had no intention of implementing the understandings he had reached with the LM (1965 was a presidential election year, after all, and he sought US support), and so the LM withdrew from the coalition. On this occasion, the PKP, and the LM which it led, had obviously backed the wrong horse. But this does not demonstrate that the two-stage revolution concept is intrinsically incorrect or bound to fail. Scalice makes no investigation of why, and within such a short space of time, the LM-LP coalition fell apart. In fact, the coalition could never have worked, because in January 1962 Macapagal had entered the first loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund, under which he was obliged to devalue the peso. As Filipino businesses with dollar loans saw their indebtedness balloon, many import-substitution industries went to the wall – and many members of the trade unions affiliated to the LM would have found themselves unemployed. Previously, virtually every section of the Philippine economy had been patrolled by US advisors; with the 1962 agreement, that job had been outsourced to the IMF. Under these conditions it was hardly likely that Macapagal would be allowed to complete the “unfinished revolution”. This does not appear to have occurred to Scalice any more than it had to the leaders of the PKP and LM.

## The Movement for the Advancement of Nationalism

In 1967, the PKP took the lead in the formation of the Movement for the Advancement of Nationalism (MAN). According to Scalice, this was “a collection of businessmen and political figures dedicated to the defense of the interests of Filipino capitalists”,<sup>24</sup> “an organisation designed to bring the working class, youth and peasantry under the political sway of the national bourgeoisie”.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, one of MAN’s aims was nationalist industrialisation, but its programme was much the same as those of the labour, peasant and youth organisations under PKP leadership: an end to the Military Bases Agreement with the USA and the postwar parity provisions, a thoroughgoing land reform etc.

MAN’s difference lay in the breadth of its support. Among its charter members were 22 businessmen, 91 youth and students, 86 peasant leaders, 61 labour leaders, 21 women’s leaders, 29 educators, 24 professionals, 6 scientists and technologists, 13 media workers, 17 writers, 7 political leaders and 11 civic leaders. It adopted very ambitious organisational plans: the highest decision-making body would be the national congress, to be held every two years, below which would be a national council, an executive board and committees at the regional, provincial, district and municipal levels.

There can be little doubt that MAN, if its organisational aims had been achieved, could have made a significant difference to the political landscape of the Philippines. Unfortunately, later that same year José Maria Sison (who had been entrusted with the general secretaryship of MAN) broke with the PKP and embarked on his Maoist path. This disrupted the work of MAN, although it would struggle on until the declaration of martial law in 1972. There has never since been such a broad anti-imperialist organisation in the Philippines – a key reason, it might be argued, why the two-stage revolution has not prospered.

## Support for Marcos?

Scalice tries his utmost, regardless of evidence to the contrary, to link the PKP with Ferdinand Marcos from as early as the mid-1960s.

“In 1965, sensing greener pastures,” he writes, “the PKP backed Macapagal’s rival, Ferdinand Marcos.”<sup>26</sup> Earlier that year, however, Ignacio Lacsina had written in *Progressive Review*: “There is no real difference between the LP [Liberal Party] and the NP [Nacionalista Party]. On the level of policy, they are the same political party.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, the PKP’s provisional central committee was divided on the issue of the 1965 elections, with some arguing that Marcos should be supported on condition that his Nacionalista Party adopted “guest candidates” from the Lapiang Manggagawa, while others called for a complete boycott.<sup>28</sup>

Then, according to Scalice, in 1966 Marcos brought a number of PKP members and supporters “into his administration, supplying them with salaried government positions.”<sup>26</sup> Really? He supplies no names, cites no sources, although later he says that they “staffed the Labor Bureau,”<sup>29</sup> and so we can deduce that he is referring to Blas Ople, Secretary of Labor, and Adrian Cristobal, his deputy. But these were never party members, although it is true that Ople, who was often described as a “left nationalist” at this stage of his career, probably shared some positions with the PKP; in 1972, for example, he was a co-founder of the Philippine-Soviet Friendship Society.

It is the case, however, that in October 1966 Ruben Torres was recruited as a technical assistant in the office of Rafael Salas, then Executive Secretary. Torres, who had been recruited to the PKP the previous year, recalls that, as he worked for the government until 5 pm and then joined the demonstrations outside the

presidential palace, “against the government, against Marcos”, he was told to resign either from the government or from the movement. He therefore left his government job in May 1967.<sup>30</sup> Thus, when Scalice describes him as “a salaried employee of the Marcos government” while he worked in the PKP-led Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in 1967,<sup>31</sup> he omits the word “former”. He is equally wide of the mark when he claims that in 1972 Torres oversaw the PKP’s street battles against the Maoists “while working as a salaried Marcos administration official.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1969, another election year, the PKP had an incentive to support Marcos because, says Scalice, among other things, “he was negotiating the release of PKP members in prison.”<sup>33</sup> No: the release of prisoners would not be negotiated until five years later, and the PKP called for a boycott of the 1969 elections – and the mid-terms in 1971.<sup>34</sup> In fact, however, there were reasons why the PKP might have taken a more positive view of Marcos at around this time. In 1969, he signed the Report of the Special House Committee on Social and Economic Planning. Known as the ‘Magna Carta’, according to Alejandro Lichauco this “embraced the entire range of the nation’s political economy, including its foreign relations; it demanded an end to parity, the Filipinisation of the economy and called for an independent foreign policy.”<sup>35</sup> This was effectively scuppered by a World Bank devaluation demand. (In fact, Marcos may have unwittingly laid the grounds for this by his reckless spending in his successful attempt to defeat his opponent, the US-backed Sergio Osmeña Jr, in the 1969 election.)

Early the following year, Labor Secretary Blas Ople recommended that a \$427,000 aid programme by the American-Asian Free Labor Institute be scrapped owing to allegations that the organisation was a CIA front (which indeed it was) aimed at ‘capturing’ Philippine labour. The following year, amid rumours of an assassination bid, Marcos insisted that the entire CIA team in the Philippines be recalled. But the PKP still showed no signs of moving closer to Marcos; perhaps, so soon after the Macapagal experience, this was a case of ‘once bitten, twice shy’.

Scalice makes no mention of these developments, and persists in asserting that the PKP supported Marcos this early, despite the fact that some of the evidence he himself provides demonstrates that this was not so: a leaflet issued by the Malayang Pagkakaisa ng Kabataang Pilipino (MPKP, or Free Union of Filipino Youth), the PKP’s youth organisation, in January 1970 expressed no confidence in Marcos’s intention to depart from neo-colonial development and called for action against the “fascist menace”, “economic sabotage” and “bogus land reform”.<sup>36</sup> A further MPKP statement issued a few days later asserted:

“Police brutality, blatantly displayed in the January 26 demonstration will not dampen the struggling activism of the youth. All the more, this even increases the enthusiasm and determination of the youth in their struggle for national democracy.”

Similarly, the PKP-led Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation denounced “the use of naked force” by “the power holders”.<sup>37</sup> An MPKP leaflet issued in mid-February 1970 described Marcos as an “agent of American imperialism”.

In 1971, Marcos published *Today’s Revolution: Democracy* (ghosted by Adrian Cristobal) in which he argued: “When the consciousness of the political authority coincides with the revolutionary demands of the masses a revolution initiated by government becomes a matter of necessity.”<sup>38</sup> Says Scalice:

“In modified Stalinist rhetoric, *Today’s Revolution: Democracy* laid out Marcos’s proposal to declare himself dictator, seize the assets of his rivals, and shut down the press. The PKP thus had one of its leading supporters write the document, which it then used as a pretext to show that Marcos and martial law were progressive and which Marcos himself used as a justification for dictatorship.”<sup>29,39</sup>

There were, in fact, no such proposals in *Today’s Revolution*.

How to demonstrate that this document gained the immediate acceptance of the PKP? This obviously gives Scalice a problem, and so he writes:

“Jesus Lava wrote a public response to the release of *Today’s Revolution: Democracy*, effusively describing the book as ‘a brilliant analysis of the ills of Philippine society as well as a prescription for a ‘revolution’ from the centre.’”<sup>29</sup>

Two things must be said of this. First, although a former general secretary, Jesus Lava was no longer in the leadership of the PKP. He was, in fact, in prison! Second, and more significantly, it is only when we check Scalice’s source in the endnote that we realise that he is quoting from Lava’s *Memoirs of a Communist*, published in 2002 – 31 years after the appearance of *Today’s Revolution*, and long after Lava had been expelled from the PKP! This can only be described as an attempt at sleight of hand – and not, as we shall see, the only one in Scalice’s account.

Marcos’s book was, in fact, dismissed as hypocrisy by the Movement for the Advancement of Nationalism, and laughed at by the PKP’s *Ang Komunista*.<sup>40</sup> It cannot be the case, therefore, that the party “had one of its leading supporters write the document”, something made even less likely by the fact that the slim volume hits a distinctly anti-communist note on several occasions.

### Who were the bombers?

Where is all this leading?

Scalice hopes to show that the PKP was so close to Marcos that it knowingly, and with his cooperation, facilitated the declaration of martial law by conducting a bombing campaign in Metro Manila.<sup>41</sup> He says that two of those responsible for this campaign, Pastor Tabinas (known as Commander Soliman) and Ruben Torres,

“had intimate ties to the Marcos government. Their travel ... was facilitated by Marcos, and Torres was employed in Enrile’s [Juan Ponce Enrile, Secretary of National Defense] office at the time of the 1971 terror campaign.”<sup>42</sup>

There is, however, no evidence that Torres was involved in the bombing campaign; in fact, he was later assigned by the PKP to wind up the bombing group. Furthermore, Torres never worked in Enrile’s office. When Scalice talks of travel arrangements, he refers to a trip to Moscow in August 1969 undertaken by Torres, Soliman and Haydee Yorac. As Soliman points out, however, they first went to Tokyo, where their documents were processed,<sup>43</sup> and so Marcos had nothing to “facilitate”. Soliman was arrested in November 1972 and held until 1975,<sup>43</sup> hardly treatment appropriate for someone who had knowingly cooperated with Marcos to facilitate martial law.

Citing my *A Movement Divided*, Scalice says that it was later revealed that some of the “most active members” of the bombing campaign “were agents planted by the military”.<sup>31</sup> Hold on ....

If the whole operation was being carried out with Marcos's knowledge and support, why would the military need to have its agents infiltrate it? Scalice seems unaware that he has contradicted himself.

There is no doubt that some PKP members carried out a bombing campaign, but as Scalice will know from *A Movement Divided*,<sup>44</sup> they did so against the wishes of the party, which had denied a request for the formation of an urban guerrilla group. Moreover, after the declaration of martial law, some of those conducting the bombing campaign broke from the PKP and formed the Marxist-Leninist Group (MLG) which, influenced by the writing of the expelled Brazilian communist Carlos Marighella, sought to continue the armed struggle. How does Scalice explain this if, as he claims, the bombers had "the blessing and support of Marcos?" He does not even try.

"The PKP", writes Scalice, endorsed Marcos's "declaration of martial law and supported his dictatorial regime, murdering their own members who opposed this policy."<sup>45</sup> The party leaders, he claims,

"turned in cold fury upon their own membership. Summoning the spectre of 'Trotskyism,' they systematically assassinated the opposition in a rampage that drowned their insubordinate rank and file in blood."<sup>43</sup>

As we shall see, the PKP did not endorse martial law. As Scalice later acknowledges,<sup>46</sup> the violence was actually directed at members of the MLG. And rather than "a rampage that drowned their insubordinate rank and file in blood", many members of the dissident group were later readmitted to the party.

But, yes, some died. Was it because they opposed an alliance with Marcos? This simply could not have been the case, as these events took place twenty months before the PKP concluded its political settlement with Marcos. In fact, the MLG had determined to assassinate PKP leaders who opposed armed struggle. Thus, the PKP violence was pre-emptive in nature. But Scalice twists the truth, saying that the MLG activists were murdered first and that the MLG *then responded* by "attempting to assassinate the leadership of the PKP". He then contradicts himself by quoting Pastor Tabinas (Commander Soliman): "All those with an assignment to assassinate the leaders were annihilated."<sup>47</sup>

### **Martial law endorsed?**

Scalice claims that the PKP supported the martial law declaration. But, possibly without realising it, he provides evidence that this simply could not have been the case, quoting a letter from William Pomeroy to leading CPUSA member James Allen, written shortly after the declaration. Says Pomeroy:

"Of course Marcos will no doubt shut off our own legal forms of struggle. He will hit at both his right and left opposition. The period ahead will be bleak. But we think our movement has prepared for it and is in a position to survive it."<sup>48</sup>

The letter ends:

"In general, we reserve judgement on the developments until we have more detailed information. We don't have any illusions about any sector of the Philippine ruling classes, but there are differences and antagonisms that we need to recognise and work with."<sup>49</sup>

This is hardly the language of a party which has collaborated with Marcos in preparation for martial law! And had Scalice bothered to consult Pomeroy's *An American-Made Tragedy*, he would have seen that, as late as 1974, Pomeroy was still opposed to Marcos.

"Within three months of the imposition of military dictatorship in the Philippines," writes Scalice, "the leadership of the PKP had given their full endorsement to the martial law regime."<sup>50</sup> The party's Sixth Congress, he says, "was dedicated to the topic of support for the martial law regime."<sup>51</sup>

Such claims are simply untrue. Instead, the 1973 congress characterised the Marcos regime as "the dictatorship of foreign monopoly capital". Furthermore, the first of ten demands put forward in the programme adopted by that congress was that "Martial law should be terminated and civil liberties restored, all political prisoners released, and a free and popular discussion of the new Constitution conducted."<sup>52</sup> Scalice, who claims to have read *A Movement Divided*, would have known this.

It is worth examining Scalice's claim in more depth, as this throws light on his method. First, he states: "The party had been preparing for its Sixth Congress, which was dedicated to the topic of support for the martial law regime, for over a year." The information regarding the year's preparation is taken from *A Movement Divided*.<sup>53</sup> He then quotes Romeo Dizon, a former central committee member (also from *A Movement Divided*): "The preparation took more than one year. Even before martial law was declared there were discussions." Scalice then concludes: "Before martial law had been declared, the party was actively preparing for the congress in which they [*sic*] would officially embrace it." But, of course, Dizon said nothing about endorsing martial law, and nor could he have, because there was no such intention.

"In the wake of the congress," says Scalice, "the PKP demanded a renewal of party membership, and every cadre had to state agreement with the documents of the congress in order to be a member of the PKP." True enough, and surely understandable so soon after the MLG experience. But he then concludes, "Allying with Marcos and endorsing martial law were now prerequisites for membership in the party." No, because the congress had proposed neither an alliance with Marcos nor an endorsement of martial law!

### **Political settlement**

In 1974, as the PKP's peasant membership responded favourably to Marcos's land reform and the government set about establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, the party leadership, seeing possibilities in the regime's programme (among which was its own legalisation), emerged from the underground and, entering into negotiations with Marcos, came to a "political settlement".<sup>54</sup>

Before concluding the settlement, the PKP held a series of conferences in order to reassess its position and then, before the final meeting with Marcos, conducted a party-wide consultation.<sup>55</sup> This, of course, would hardly have been necessary if support for Marcos was now a condition of party membership!

Contrary to Scalice's claim, the political settlement was not "surrender". The PKP agreed to renounce armed struggle and to support those government policies it deemed progressive – land reform, the proposed restructuring of the labour movement on the basis of industrial unionism (this was not achieved), an independent foreign policy, the formation of worker and peasant cooperatives and "all other measures which clearly redound to the improvement of the lot of the Filipino people" – in return for which the government agreed that no one would be detained by virtue of membership of the PKP or the mass organisations it led;

all such current prisoners would be released; a general amnesty would be declared for all members of the PKP and its mass organisations; and the PKP would be fully legalised in due course.

When certain newspapers used the word “surrender” or even claimed that the PKP had agreed to its own “dismantlement”, the party called a press conference at which it explained that there had been no surrender, general secretary Felicísimo Macapagal pointing out that the party’s offer to cooperate and actively participate in the implementation of certain government policies would have been meaningless if it were dismantled. Nor did the PKP, by means of the political settlement, endorse martial law. Indeed, three months later Felicísimo Macapagal wrote an open letter to Marcos, urging him to “restore the organisation rights of the working people” as “a concrete step towards the lifting of martial law”.<sup>56</sup>

Scalice claims that at public ceremonies marking the conclusion of the political settlement, party members were photographed and fingerprinted by the Philippine Constabulary.<sup>57</sup> As his source, he cites *A Movement Divided*, but mentions neither the fact that this was a claim by Francisco Nemenzo Jr, former MLG leader, nor that I go on to say that the PKP insists that there was no registration of individual members.<sup>58</sup>

As a result of the political settlement, says Scalice, members of the PKP were given salaried positions. He mentions Blas Ople and Adrian Cristobal as Secretary and Under-Secretary of Labour, but acknowledges that they were not actually PKP members and had been in position well before martial law. But they were, he says, “fellow travellers”.<sup>59</sup> Just how warm a “fellow traveller” Blas Ople was may be judged from the fact that, when Ruben Torres joined him at the Bureau of Labor in 1975, Ople’s advice was that he should leave the PKP in order to be completely “rehabilitated”. Torres eventually resigned his party membership in 1977.<sup>60</sup>

In his dissertation, the only other name Scalice mentions in this context is Merlin Magallona who, he says, “as a result of the negotiations ... was made Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs.” Was Magallona involved in the negotiation of the political settlement? Yes, he was. Was he appointed as Undersecretary at the Department of Foreign Affairs? Yes, he was – in 2001, a decade after opting out of the PKP, and a full 27 years after the conclusion of the political settlement! Is it even remotely possible that Scalice was unaware of this?

In *The Drama of Dictatorship*, Scalice adds the names of a few more PKP members holding “salaried government offices”. Besides Magallona, he gives us Haydee Yorac, Romeo Dizon and Domingo Castro. Well, Magallona, Yorac and Dizon were academics: should lecturing at the University of the Philippines be considered working in the Marcos administration? I am unfamiliar with Domingo Castro. Felicísimo Macapagal was, says Scalice, “a paid official of the Land Authority”,<sup>49</sup> although his daughter, Ramel Macapagal Paris, assures me that he never held a government position during the Marcos presidency.<sup>61</sup>

Even more controversially, Scalice claims that some leading members of the PKP “became colonels of military intelligence”.<sup>13</sup> Eventually, he names Ernesto Macahiya as having been “made a colonel in the military”.<sup>62</sup> Macahiya had indeed been active in the PKP and several of its mass organisations, but following his arrest upon the declaration of martial law he dropped out of party activity. He later became an executive in the Development Bank of the Philippines and during the presidency of Fidel Ramos worked in the office of the executive secretary. The rank of colonel can be attained by leading corporate and civilian government officials by enrolling with the National Defense College and,

after a year of studies and tours alongside military officials with the rank of major, graduates attain the rank of lieutenant colonel as reservists. Macahiya, therefore, may never have seen active service – and if he did it would have been long after he had left the PKP.<sup>63</sup>

### Marcos fails to deliver

Over the next few years, the Marcos regime clearly failed to realise its nationalist potential, due in part to the fact that the economy was subject to oversight by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

At its Eighth Congress in December 1980 (the Seventh had been less than four years earlier, in 1977), the PKP noted that since the declaration of martial law the economy had been restructured in favour of foreign capital, while the “transnational economic stranglehold leads to political developments which strengthen the repressive character of the state and align it even further with the forces of imperialism.” Not only had the regime’s economic policies failed to alleviate unemployment, social inequality and poverty but, “far from helping solve the crisis and defending our national interests against colonial onslaughts, [they] are only aggravating the crisis still further and weakening the cause of economic independence and national self-reliance.”<sup>64</sup>

At this congress, then, the PKP withdrew its qualified support for Marcos. Scalice, of course, makes no mention of this.

### Socialism?

Scalice claims to be a Marxist, and yet, while he devotes an inordinate amount of space to the activity of the CPP and the PKP among students, their work among the working class and peasantry gets barely a mention.

Neither does he explore alternative methods by which the national-democratic revolution might be approached, *ie* other than by armed struggle (the CPP) or giving a sitting president qualified support (the PKP). Might a revival of the kind of programme adopted by the Movement for the Advancement of Nationalism in 1967 not have been a fair bet, covering the archipelago with groups campaigning for nationalist industrialisation and development – and, in the process, throwing up leaders who might, with massive grassroots support, enter into positions of influence?

But Scalice would not be interested in such an alternative because, of course, he views the two-stage revolution as betrayal, counselling instead that the working class should be educated and mobilised for the socialist revolution.

One might have expected, therefore, that both his dissertation and his book would conclude with an outline of how a socialist revolution might be achieved in Philippine conditions. But to do this Scalice, as a “Marxist”, would need to analyse the structure of both the working class and the economy, something which he signally fails to do. Should he undertake this task, however, what would he find?

This from the late anti-imperialist historian Renato Constantino:

“In 1975 ... there were only 1,763 Collective Bargaining Agreements covering some 441,590 workers on file at the Department of Labor. Since workers are considered effectively unionised and recognised only upon coverage of certified CBAs, only eight percent of the 5.8 million wage and salary workers in 1975 were organised in a meaningful way. In 1982 there were only 1,729 CBAs covering some 285,000 workers

on file at the Ministry of Labor and Employment.<sup>65</sup>

And more recently?

“According to the April 2011 Labor Force Survey, there were 36.821 million workers, of whom only 20.25 million were wage and salary workers, most of the remainder being own-account workers and unpaid family workers. In March 2011, 1.755 million members were – allegedly – organised in ... trade unions, but only 225,000 (down from 555,000 as recently as 2005) were covered by CBAs (of which there were a mere 1,447, down from 2,805 in 2005 ...).

In manufacturing, out of a total of 3.125 million workers, a mere 91,092 (2.9 percent) are covered by CBAs. In transport, storage, and communications, just 37,379 of a total of 2.705 million workers (1.38 percent) are covered by CBAs. In the burgeoning services sector ... out of a massive 7.243 million workers, just 15,369 benefit from a CBA – an abysmal 0.2 percent!”<sup>66</sup>

To a significant extent, these uninspiring figures arise from the fact that the vast majority of Philippine workplaces are small, often employing so few workers as to be unorganisable in the trade union sense – let alone in a socialist sense. According to a recent World Bank report, 99% of Philippine enterprises are accounted for by micro firms with fewer than ten paid employees and small firms with fewer than 100 paid employees. In 2019, such firms employed over half of waged employees.<sup>67</sup>

Such facts surely point to the need for a thoroughgoing programme of development and nationalist industrialisation by a national-democratic regime.

## Notes and References

- 1 J Scalice, dissertation, UC Berkeley Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2017 (Scalice, dissn).
- 2 www.josephscalice.com.
- 3 See Scalice’s video interview at <https://www.wsws.org/en/topics/event/joseph-scalice-philippines>.
- 4 K Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, University of the Philippines Press, Quezon City, 2011.
- 5 Scalice, dissn, p 10.
- 6 Fuller, *Forcing the Pace*, University of the Philippines Press, Quezon City, 2007.
- 7 The World Socialist Web Site, run by the International Committee of the Fourth International, regularly intervenes in British trade union affairs, accusing progressive union leaders like Unite’s Sharon Graham and RMT’s Mick Lynch of betraying their members, and calling for the establishment of rank-and-file committees to wrest control of disputes from the “bureaucrats”.
- 8 Scalice, dissn, p 781.
- 9 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 234.
- 10 D Fortuna Anwar, ‘A Journey of Change: Indonesia’s Foreign Policy’, in *Global Asia*, Vol 4, No 3, September 2009, pp 16-20.
- 11 Scalice, dissn, p 230.
- 12 *Ibid*, p 783.
- 13 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 237.
- 14 Scalice, dissn, p 1.
- 15 See, for example, J Mellen, *Hellman and Hammett: The Legendary Passion of Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett*, Harper Collins, New York, 1996, p 114.
- 16 Writing in the 1930s, US communist Joseph Freeman viewed Trotskyists with amused contempt, saying that they had discovered that they “could be ‘communists’ without being communists”: J Freeman, *An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics*, Victor Gollancz, Left Book Club Edition, London, 1938, p 547.
- 17 Scalice, dissn, p 144.
- 18 A further such indication is that in his book Scalice says that the “PKP placed itself at the head of the *Huk* peasant rebellion in the

- early 1950s” (see endnote 24 below), whereas in fact the peasant-based *Hukbalahap* had been formed under PKP leadership in March 1942, becoming transformed into the *Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan* (Army of National Liberation) in the postwar period.
- 19 Scalice, dissn, p 156.
- 20 Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, p 17.
- 21 Editorial, ‘Towards a Broad, National Front’, in *Progressive Review*, No 5, p 2.
- 22 ‘Lapiang Manggagawa Manifesto on Laurel-Langley Agreement’, 2 October, 1964, reprinted in *Progressive Review*, No 5, pp 11-12.
- 23 ‘January 25th Manifesto’, reprinted in *Progressive Review*, No 6, pp 10-17.
- 24 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 9.
- 25 Scalice, dissn, p 248.
- 26 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 10.
- 27 Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, p 20.
- 28 *Ibid*, p 21.
- 29 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 238.
- 30 N Joaquin, *A Kadre’s Road to Damascus: The Ruben Torres Story*, Miraflores Publishing Inc, Quezon City, 2003, pp 66, 67.
- 31 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 55.
- 32 *Ibid*, p 202.
- 33 *Ibid*, pp 56-7.
- 34 W Pomeroy, *An American-Made Tragedy*, International Publishers, New York, 1974, pp 88-9.
- 35 Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, p 166.
- 36 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 65.
- 37 *Ibid*, p 68. These statements refer to the attacks by police on demonstrators outside the presidential palace on 26 January 1970, leading to what became known as the ‘First Quarter Storm’. Scalice somewhat lamely complains that the latter two documents do not mention Marcos by name.
- 38 F Marcos, *Today’s Revolution: Democracy*, Manila, 1971, p 77.
- 39 Scalice, dissn, pp 784-5.
- 40 Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, pp 168, 169.
- 41 Scalice, dissn, pp 3, 413; *The Drama of Dictatorship*, pp 5, 123, 175. Scalice provides not a shred of evidence that the bombings were conducted with Marcos’s knowledge and support, although he later cites leaflets issued by the Maoist youth group as making this allegation (dissn, p 748; *The Drama of Dictatorship*, pp 199, 208).
- 42 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 165.
- 43 Joaquin, *A Kadre’s Road to Damascus*, p 80.
- 44 Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, pp 123-4.
- 45 Scalice, dissn, p 4.
- 46 *Ibid*, p 783.
- 47 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 248. The quote from Tabinas is taken from Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, p 137.
- 48 Scalice, dissn, p 786.
- 49 *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 239.
- 50 Scalice, dissn, p 795.
- 51 *Ibid*, p 799.
- 52 Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, p 151.
- 53 *Ibid*, p 141.
- 54 Scalice, *The Drama of Dictatorship*, claims that the PKP was not underground. Has he forgotten Ruben Torres’ description of life underground in Nick Joaquin’s *A Kadre’s Road to Damascus*? And if the PKP was already allied with Marcos, why was Torres told to delay applying for amnesty for fear that Marcos might welch on the agreement and arrest the party leaders, in which case he would need to succeed Felicisimo Macapagal as general secretary?
- 55 Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, p 187.
- 56 *Ibid*, p 190.
- 57 Scalice, dissn, p 803; *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 253.
- 58 Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, pp 188-9.
- 59 Scalice, dissn, p 784.
- 60 Joaquin, *A Kadre’s Road to Damascus*, pp 110, 114.
- 61 Ramel Macapagal Paris to Ken Fuller, 9 June 2023.
- 62 Scalice, *The Drama of Dictatorship*, p 259.
- 63 K Fuller, *The Lost Vision: The Philippine Left, 1986-2010*, University of the Philippines Press, Quezon City, 2017, pp 316-17, note 33. It is possible that Scalice came upon the Macahiya story here.
- 64 Fuller, *A Movement Divided*, p 364.
- 65 R Constantino, *The Nationalist Alternative*, revd edn, Foundation for Nationalist Studies, Quezon City, 1984, p 98.
- 66 Fuller, *The Lost Vision*, pp 444-45.
- 67 World Bank, *Philippine Jobs Report*, Washington DC, February 2023.



# DISCUSSION

## A REPLY TO A REPLY

### GREG GODELS



"China – the cake of kings and... of emperors" (a French pun on king cake and kings and emperors wishing to "consume" China). French political cartoon from 1898. A pastry represents "Chine" (French for China) and is being divided between caricatures of Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom, William II of Germany (who is squabbling with Queen Victoria over a borderland piece, whilst thrusting a knife into the pie to signify aggressive German intentions), Nicholas II of Russia, who is eyeing a particular piece, the French Marianne (who is diplomatically shown as not participating in the carving, and is depicted as close to Nicholas II, as a reminder of the Franco-Russian Alliance), and a samurai representing Japan, carefully contemplating which pieces to take. A stereotypical Qing official throws his hands up in despair, trying and failing to stop them, but is powerless. It is meant to be a figurative representation of the Imperialist tendencies of these nations towards China during the decade.

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‘It is not unequal exchange that explains the inequalities of the imperialist system. Rather, it is the exploitation of labour power in areas that were previously outside of the system of capitalist exploitation. Insofar as the victims of imperialism are unable to resist the penetration of capital, the integration of their labour force into the capitalist economy, or the political dominance of the “biggest capitalist powers”, they suffer from the asymmetries of uneven development that place them at a competitive disadvantage.’

I AM APPRECIATIVE of much of what Arvinder Kandola writes in ‘The Peace Question and Imperialism: A Reply to Greg Godels’ (CR108), his response to my CR104 article. Comrade Kandola ambitiously tackles many questions related to understanding imperialism today, citing a broad cross-section of writers including A Ahmad, A Getachew, C Douzinas, P Patnaik and, most extensively, John Smith, author of *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation and Capitalism’s Final Crisis*.

While several of his themes (notably “The superstructure of imperialism” and “The state in the periphery”) are provocative and undoubtedly of interest to some readers, they have little bearing on my argument. Moreover, Kandola says next to nothing on the vital peace question that motivates my article.

Nonetheless, both articles cross terrain that is crucial to understanding global politics today. For Marxists, a clear picture of how contemporary imperialism functions should be one of our highest priorities.

Rather than weighing in on all of Kandola’s views, I will respond only where they conflict with my own as expressed in my original article.

Kandola defends “unequal exchange” as central to understanding imperialism today. He takes issue with my rejection of the theory that “unequal exchange between the highly developed countries and the developing countries ... [is] ... the principal contradiction defining imperialism and anti-imperialism”. Kandola believes that the inequalities of income, wealth, living standards, life expectancies, infant mortality, overall health etc existing between the colonial and neocolonial states and the colonies and former colonies are explained by unequal exchange. I disagree.

Further, he believes that by rejecting the centrality of unequal exchange, I am, therefore, committed to overlooking the importance of “superexploitation”. (In his own words: “I will argue...that denying the ‘foundational’ role of superexploitation in modern imperialism obfuscates the extent to which workers in the Third World and in the imperialist nations are oppressed and exploited in common ....”)

But he is wrong that I deny the importance of the exploitation nexus.

Moreover, he confuses unequal exchange with exploitation. Unequal exchange is a relationship between commodities under the capitalist mode of production – a relationship that occurs as an *exception* to the law of value. Exploitation, on the other hand,

is a *systemic* relationship between value creators and appropriators of value – a relationship that is essential to, even determinative of, the law of value.

In the history of capitalism, unequal exchange – fraud, theft, deception, coercion etc – occurs frequently, but is not – cannot be – a common feature of capitalism’s trajectory. Examples of wilfully unequal exchange abound, but they are episodic and unstable.

Imperialism in its colonial form and in its modern neocolonial form are not organised larceny, but a system of capitalist *exploitation* based upon the export of accumulated capital and which is enabled by political or economic domination – what Lenin describes as “the territorial division of the world among the biggest capitalist powers”.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the colonial or national subjects are not asked if they want to participate in the system, though today it is not uncommon for their national bourgeoisie or their political strata to collaborate with the imperialists.

It is not unequal exchange that explains the inequalities of the imperialist system. Rather, it is the exploitation of labour power in areas that were previously outside of the system of capitalist exploitation. Insofar as the victims of imperialism are unable to resist the penetration of capital, the integration of their labour force into the capitalist economy, or the political dominance of the “biggest capitalist powers”, they suffer from the asymmetries of uneven development that place them at a competitive disadvantage.

Just as the shrinking of available labour power (eg after wars, revolutions, or plagues) raises its cost of reproduction and lowers the rate of exploitation, the increase of available labour power from colonial expansion (or from the People’s Republic of China opening to the global market in 1978, or the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe in the last 50 years) lowers its cost of reproduction in general and raises the rate of exploitation. (Of course, we can advantageously call this leap in the rate of exploitation “superexploitation” if we like). The exchange value of the commodity, labour power, falls when new sources of labour are exploited, just as the exchange value of the commodity, oil, falls when new sources of oil are exploited.

While the theorists of the popular World Systems approach<sup>2</sup> have made many contributions to our understanding of imperialism, their widely adopted concept of unequal exchange is not one of them: it substitutes the morally-soaked, value-judgmental idea of ‘orderly’ extortion (cheating) for the scientific, politico-economic Marxist concept of exploitation. Kandola confuses the two distinct and irreconcilable ideas.

## II

Admirably, Kandola writes that the “workers in the Third World and in the imperialist nations are oppressed and exploited in common ....” Though they may be exploited in different ways and in different places, they are indeed all subjects of capitalist exploitation. This is certainly a logical conclusion that flows from the Marxist theory of exploitation. Further, the Marxist theory of exploitation is built on the analytical primacy of class and class relations.

Unfortunately, Comrade Kandola compromises this basic fact, vacillating between class exploitation and the dynamics of inter-imperialist rivalry in his disquisition on imperialism. Questions of class are left murky by foregrounding state-to-state relations.

He asks what he takes to be a rhetorical question: “Are we only expected to fight against the exploitation of the Third World after careful analysis of the class composition of each ruling class?”

In an important sense, the answer is “yes”. For those who represent the interests of the working class (the Communists!), the first question must always be: How does any political act advance the interests of working people, regardless of how it may damage or enhance the interests of the ‘country’ or nation-state as interpreted by the capitalist ruling class?

William I Robinson explains this difference well in a recent article:<sup>3</sup>

“The ‘anti-imperialists’ [advocates of multipolarity, BRICS expansion] have reverted to a conception of sovereignty, not of the people or the working classes, but of the rulers in countries that they defend. Anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles in the twentieth century defended national – not state – sovereignty in the face of interference by the imperial powers. Capitalist states use this claim to sovereignty as a ‘right’ to exploit and oppress inside national borders free from outside interference ....

Proletarian internationalism calls on the working and oppressed classes of one country to extend solidarity not to states but to the struggles of the working and oppressed classes of other countries. States deserve the left’s support to the extent – and only to the extent – that they advance the emancipatory struggles of the popular and working classes, that they advance, or are forced to advance, policies that favour these classes. The ‘anti-imperialists’ conflate state with nation, country, and people, generally lacking any theoretical conception of these categories and advancing populist over class political orientation. We on the left condemned the US invasion and occupation of Iraq earlier this century. We did so not because we supported the Saddam Hussein regime – only a fool could have – but because we stood in solidarity with the Iraqi people and because the whole imperial project for the Middle East was tantamount to an attack on the poor and the oppressed everywhere.”

Robinson highlights the confusion between defending national interests as the interests of working people and ‘national interests’ as defined by an often corrupt, capitalist state. This is the great error of multipolarity when conceived as levelling the interests of nation states when those same states trample on their own working people. How strengthening expanded BRICS around the corrupt, feudal, reactionary state of Saudi Arabia, for example, could bring a more just global economy for working people is beyond imagination.

Understanding imperialism as a state-against-state phenomenon, rather than as capitalists and capitalism against working people, leads to some absurd conclusions. Borrowing an example from Robinson, at one juncture the Indian corporate giant, TATA group, owned enough UK-based corporations to constitute the largest single employer (exploiter) in the UK. Following the fashionable state-versus-state understanding of anti-imperialism, we would have to say that the UK was the subject of Indian imperialism – a ridiculous claim.

The proponents of multipolarity as an answer to imperialism believe that a defence of the ‘underdog’ states against the more powerful states is the central battle of our time. They believe that without US imperialism, the world would be safe, harmonious, and peaceful. This is Karl Kautsky’s ultra-imperialism updated to the twenty-first century. I must quote John Smith in a recent interview,<sup>4</sup> an author whom Kandola regards and relies on more than any other:

“One thing I would add is this: it is in the DNA of every capitalist to become an imperialist; every capitalist wants to have a monopoly and preserve it at all costs in order to get more profit than their rivals. No capitalist is content with simply exploiting their workers; they dream about how they can superexploit them and, when they have an opportunity to do so, they will do it. This is just as true of Russian and Chinese capitalists as it is of those residing in Germany, Britain and the US. There is plenty of debate about whether we can describe China as a capitalist country. Finding just one word to label China is probably futile. We should perhaps be a bit more patient in this regard ....

The idea that social revolution is inconceivable and that the best we can hope for is an end to US/Western hegemony and the emergence of a multipolar world has been gaining ground among opponents of Western imperialism around the world. In reality, a multipolar capitalist world, a world of rival hegemonies and would-be hegemonies contesting for power, is a world at war. And the idea that we should back one side or another ... seems to me absurd.”

The historical record bears Smith out. As Lenin and far-too-few other socialists of his time recognised, World War I was an imperialist war between capitalist rivals. Picking one side over another was absurd and a disaster for millions of workers. That experience should guide us in our stance toward the war in Ukraine. The idea that we should back one side or the other is equally absurd. Negotiation and peace are the answer to the peace question. A military solution will only prove a disaster for Ukrainian and Russian workers who will die in this war.

Smith provides us with a concise picture of our world and the choices that stand before revolutionary socialists and Communists:

“Once we understand the significance of outsourcing production to low-wage countries; how the expansion of the global workforce led to a massive increase in the creation of surplus value due to these new additions to the global working class being subject to much higher rates of exploitation than workers in the imperialist countries; and how decisive all this was to giving capitalism another 30 or 40 years of life, then we can begin to understand just how deep the crisis is for capitalism. There is no peaceful capitalist way out of this crisis. And neither the rulers of China nor of Russia, or of any other government – with the extremely important excep-

tion of the revolutionary government in Cuba – are pointing to a socialist solution to the crisis facing humanity.”

Kandola offers a tiny ray of hope for multipolarity: “For poorer nations the emergence of multipolarity *may* offer respite and opportunities which US domination has denied.” It may offer opportunities for other rich capitalist countries to step in as well. Surely, basing change on such a slender reed of possibility takes the working class far from the promise of revolutionary change animated by the *Communist Manifesto* and its message of scientific socialism. It must be kept in mind that the US defends an order that is meant to benefit capitalism – at home and internationally. If capitalist BRICS governments like Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt etc are challenging the US, it is not the system itself or capitalism, but their place in it.

With over 30 years elapsed since the fall of Soviet socialism, many comrades have become discouraged, lowering their expectations and placing socialism far beyond the horizon. Too often false hope is found in the rivalries of capitalist states, a sign of conflict within the capitalist system, but not necessarily a crack in the system. While those rivalries can be exploited by the working class, they should not be taken as a substitute for class struggle. I’ll let John Smith have the last word:

“Convincing people that socialism is necessary is not so difficult; what is much more difficult is to convince people that socialism is possible. This is why President Joe Biden has maintained all of Donald Trump’s hundreds of additional

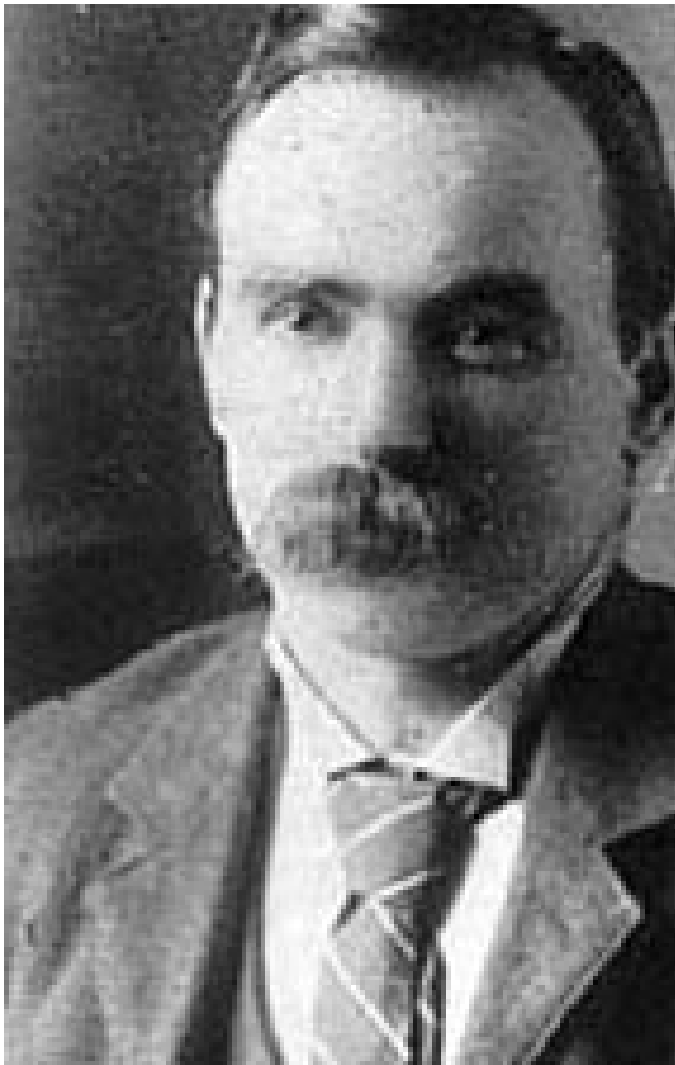
measures that have tightened the 60-year blockade of Cuba. He understands that it is imperative to destroy the country that proves that socialism is possible. Yet, despite this intense pressure, life expectancy in Cuba is several years longer than in the US – and many years longer if you are Black or working-class, since average data for the US masks enormous racial and class inequalities.

Wherever we are subjectively, objectively, the necessity to begin a transition towards communism is posed by this existential crisis. There is no other way out for humanity than this. Anything that distracts us from this, any sort of fantasy that some kind of a multipolar world will be better in any way, must be dispelled because we do not have any more time to waste.”

Wise words!

## Notes and References

- 1 *Lenin, Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/imperialism.pdf>, p 67.
- 2 See [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/World-systems\\_theory](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/World-systems_theory) –Ed.
- 3 WI Robinson, *The Unbearable Manicheanism of the ‘Anti-Imperialist’ Left*, at <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/the-unbearable-manicheanism-of-the-anti-imperialist-left/>.
- 4 J Smith and F Fuentes, *Twenty-first century imperialism, multipolarity and capitalism’s ‘final crisis’*, at <https://links.org.au/twenty-first-century-imperialism-multipolarity-and-capitalisms-final-crisis>.



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# SOUL FOOD FRAN LOCK IGNITING THE FIRE: POETRY AND KEEPING HOPE ALIVE



I BEGAN WRITING this column looking for reasons to stay ‘hopeful’, whatever that means. I used to know. Or else, I thought I did: something like Gramsci’s riff on Romain Rolland, “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”. Which is not merely a clear-eyed understanding of how bad things are, but an acknowledgement that the conditions for revolutionary change do not yet exist. Such change, for Gramsci, could only be brought about through organised, disciplined action – specifically, through the vanguard party seeking to establish a workers’ state. Obviously, this is not within the scope of our daily lives, but we can still find inspiration in the fact that Gramsci’s ‘hope’ – like our ‘solidarity’ – is a verb and not a noun. It exists only in its active expression.

This is what I and others lose sight of at times: this sense of hope as something we do, and not something we feel. We have given up the idea of hope as purposeful, collective action. We have been looking for the wrong things in the wrong place. We should be seeking, not reasons to be hopeful, but ways of being hopeful. This realisation is potentially significant: it allows us to see how the notion of hope has been co-opted by various

neoliberal forces as a means of discouraging action in the face of oppression. If hope is neutered from its intended action-oriented nature, then it becomes individualistic and passive, an adult form of wishful-thinking, an ongoing distraction from the work we are called to do. The more I sit with this thought, the more I see the rebranding of hope as supremely tactical, part of a pincer manoeuvre that attempts to deny poor and working-class people the experience of hope through the twin levers of destruction and appropriation.

In the first instance, we are robbed of our capacity to hope, to imagine a future with us in it. Hope is destroyed by an all-pervasive inequality of access, opportunity and provision; our oppressions are daily, multiple, and utterly exhausting, so much so that they seem absolute and inescapable. We are so consumed with the work of daily survival that our strength is too sapped for anything else. In the second instance, our hope is diverted into self-transcending narratives of ultimate ‘success’. Hope is repurposed as idle escape fantasy, or the cut-throat hustle to rise above our class. Such narratives are as popular as they are insidious: they paint achieving change – especially economic change, and especially as it concentrates within individual lives – as the sole motivator for working towards change. No value is placed on common struggle, no credence is given to the generational and on-going nature of hope. Rather, hope becomes a closed circuit: a privatised end, not an open, collective means.

Aaron Kent’s poem in this column, *A Collective Noun is a Hostile State*, takes this tendency fiercely and directly to task. It does so in a number of ways, most potently by collapsing the seemingly intangible political forces that govern our lives with the injured sick and suffering bodies they act upon, suggesting that these forces may also be shattered “like glass, like kneecaps, like dreams”.

The poem is delivered in four terse tercets. Each stanza contains some kind of bodily emanation or contortion, and each contains the threat of violence or collapse. Yet I found the most compelling stanza to be the almost whimsical and least overtly violent second. It is the only stanza in which the poem’s speaker is a tangible presence; this lyric “I” announces itself, it seems, to undercut precisely its own importance in contrast with the collective, both contingent and historical. The speaker’s opening gambit, “I have nothing to offer besides”, is followed by a list of meagre contributions: “cover for/ shoplifters”, “excuses for [Guy] Fawkes”, and weirdly “pirouettes for smoking ballerinas”. Each offering emphasises the marginal, futile, or non-serious nature of the speaker’s contribution; this stands in

stark contrast to the monolithic nature of much contemporary lyric poetry that privileges its speaking subjects as originators of profound moral and artistic insight. There is no room in Kent's poem for the exceptionalism of the individual; they are part of history's chorus-line, tendering their precarious pirouettes.

In the third stanza I am struck by the brilliantly alliterative "clusterfuck/ of fences" and by the idea of "a haemoglobin swollen/ beyond the devolution of a body", which once again merges body and the body-politic, pointing to a sickened surfeit of both consumption and suffering. This grotesquerie signals something equally morbid in our shared political organism. The final stanza suggests that if the poet's response to such sickness is prioritising (and poetically aggrandising) the self, by "meditating/ on a dandelion puff" and discharging anxiety in peaceable catharsis, then such a response is, at best, inadequate. At worst, it produces a kind of "astigmatism of the soul" where one sees a distorted reflection of a world made small, and where one is distorted in turn.

A true attention to how things are – to the "hostile [political] state" – would indeed require a "hostile state" [of mind, of existence] not in renunciation of hope, but, as writer China Miéville puts it, alive to the idea that:

"There is hope. But for it to be real, and barbed, and tempered into a weapon, we cannot just default to it. We have to test it, subject it to the strain of appropriate near-despair. ... We need utopia, but to try to think utopia, in this world, without rage, without fury, is an indulgence we can't afford. In the face of what is done, we cannot think utopia without hate."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, hope – like anger – is an agitating energy. Its opposite is not hate, but indifference and apathy.

The following poem, *Your Life is Paused*, by Peadar O'Donoghue, captures this sense of apathy and its entanglement in our social-media technologies. The title and opening lines adapt the language of online streaming to highlight our enmeshment in the digital world, turning life itself into another form of arrested 'content'. With short, deceptively simple lines, O'Donoghue is able to convey the stuck, frustrated feeling that assails us when our devices or platforms fail. The poem also creates an under-song of creeping suspicion: that our own lives are similarly suspended in digital limbo, hours lost to dull-eyed doom-scrolling.

What I think is the most significant feature of the poem is its bottomless barrel of "because"s. Superficially, they resemble answers, while in reality they provide no adequate explanation or relief for the apathetic disconnect of being "on pause". Instead, their very repetition generates its own well of meaninglessness into which speaker and reader alike disappear. The vaguely paternal homilies, "Because, because, child" and "Because night follows day", sit uneasily beside references to neoliberal surveillance culture, evoking an infantilising differential in power, knowledge, and status that is as sinister as it is depressing: "Because we know all about you/ Because you know nothing/ about us".

This poem got me thinking about what we mean when we talk about 'apathy', which is often characterised as a sense of boredom or lack, a kind of negative space. O'Donoghue's poem gives us a slightly different take. In *Your Life is Paused* apathy arises from numbing inundation, emotional burn-out and attention fatigue. As with Kent's poem the lyric 'I' is absent, but not out of deference to the glorious, insurgent collective. Rather,

*Your Life is Paused* gives us the depersonalised despair of being without hope. There is a kind of generative negativity that can stimulate desire and motivate action towards change, but the horror of O'Donoghue's poem is that there is no space for such desires to seed, such intentions to form, and no community towards which the speaker can reach, only disconnected data points in an unmappable matrix of profit and carnage.

What's missing is solidarity and the reflective space in which solidarity might be imagined into existence. What O'Donoghue's poem points to is the need for and the lack of such spaces in the lives of so many of us, but it also tenders the poem itself as one such space, however narrow and however hedged. This is also what I would like to offer: the poem as a way of being hopeful; the act of reading as a form of resistance, repair and survival.

Scott Alsworth's *The History of a Spear* closes on an image of "an artefact, almost conquered and forgotten", a museum piece, stripped of activating agency, inert behind perspex. What is particularly striking about this poem is that it does not merely describe the spear, but addresses it directly, endowing it with human qualities. The effect is to blur the line between the poem's addressee (the spear) and its reader, a collapse of identities signalled through the Alsworth's use of the ambiguous pronoun "you". Because we feel implicated in the speaker's address, we understand that the poem is about more than the characteristics of a Bronze Age implement.

Specifically, I think the poem asks us to consider how dignity and an almost limitless potential can be eroded or rendered null over time. Across five tightly turned, unrhymed couplets, Alsworth shows us the spear shaping daily life ("Fish curling from your point") and pivotal in history ("In Christ's side"). Crucially, we also see the long imaginative shadow the spear casts across cultures: from "Ron" (the spear of King Arthur in the Welsh Arthurian legends), through "Gungnir" (the spear of the Norse god, Odin), to the "Gáe Bulg" (the magical spear of mortal pain belonging to the Ulster Cycle's most famous hero, Cúchulainn). In listing the spear's multiple mythical incarnations, Alsworth creates an aura of importance and richly storied symbolism around an ordinary object, used by ordinary hands. The power of these names is then swiftly undercut by the spear's current condition: trapped in "spells of perspex", "ageing with time's flesh". Alsworth's use of "spells" feels telling. It points to a warning that the aims and ambitions of museum collecting are not necessarily benevolent or neutral. In the precincts of elite intellectual and cultural space, who gets to tell those stories? Who gets to decide what those objects mean? What does that do to our idea of ourselves and what might be possible for us? Against this process of diminishment, Alsworth erects the unbounded imagination, the scene and the space of literature. The spear is only "almost" conquered and forgotten. While stories, poems, myths and legends can still be recalled and retold, we have a language in which to dream a better version of ourselves.

Is this enough? Maybe not. Not if this insistence is considered as a dry, disembodied assemblage of 'text'. But poetry has another self that exists in the shivers and chills we experience when reading or hearing it: the hitch in the breath when we speak the words out loud. Such feelings are a kind of *comunitas*, that is a fleeting sense of being present and part of something bigger than ourselves.

We've all felt this. I've felt it hearing poetry on picket-lines. I've felt it at sweaty Crass gigs. I've felt it, conversely, in church, or simply when wrapping my mouth around a favourite

poem from the past. I got to experience a version of it again after being sent *Pink Punk Poetry*, a collaboration between Swedish writer and performer Lou Ice – aka Louise Halvardsson – and Avzounds, a small scale, not-for-profit music production company based in Teesside.

Spoken, Halvardsson's poems have a relentless, nervy quality that suit the buzzing soundscapes they are paired with. Thematically, they centre on a desire for escape and autonomy from the strictures of political, social, and familial life and the limiting expectations they engender. This sense of suppressed fire is matched by Halvardsson's verbal delivery – sometimes a cool purr, sometimes a choked snarl – her voice stretching itself in multiple directions at once, creating its own idiosyncratic rhythm. On the page, the pieces have a direct, no-nonsense quality, the niceties of 'technique' subordinate to the urgency of their themes. This is not to say that Halvardsson has no knack for a striking image or an aptly turned phrase, but that's not where the poems live or how they're meant to be encountered. To do them justice, to meet them on their terms, is to listen to them. Loudly:

<https://avzounds.co.uk/#latestalbum1>

The hope I detect in Halvardsson's poems is the through-line in all of the pieces I'm sharing this quarter: it's the doing, the active, urgent movement in the world, the determination to attest to and make a life despite all and in the teeth of all that besets us. The poems are not consoling, their purpose is not to help their readers endure the endurable. Rather, they point to the work that is still to do: building the collective that we anticipate and desire.

### **A Collective Noun is a Hostile State by Aaron Kent**

The verisimilitude of law is that it too  
shatters like glass, like kneecaps, like dreams  
caught in the turbine of sleaze.

I have nothing to offer besides cover for  
shoplifters, excuses for Fawkes,  
pirouettes for smoking ballerinas.

London isn't a pipe dream, it's a clusterfuck  
of fences, a haemoglobin swollen  
beyond the devolution of a body.

You can't change the system meditating  
on a dandelion puff, or thinking yourself worthwhile.  
Bettering yourself is astigmatism for the soul.

### **Your Life is Paused by Peadar O'Donoghue**

Your life is paused

Because it is being used  
in several locations  
Because, well let's face it,  
where was it going?  
Because we know all about you  
Because you know nothing

about us  
Because, because, child.  
Because night follows day  
(but never knows where)  
Because there is so much  
Because there is so little  
Because war makes money  
Because sides means war  
Because Halliburton  
Because.

### **History of a Spear by Scott Alsworth**

here, a black  
disintegrating leaf, copper

scrollwork — dark shard in the heart  
of man, it's hard to think of you now

in primatial hands. Fish curling from your point.  
In Alexander's dreams of Kleitos. In Christ's side.

Ron, Gungnir, Gae Bulg  
in spells of perspex, all your antiquity and might

are ageing with time's flesh  
an artefact, almost conquered and forgotten.

**Image** *Hope* by George Frederic Watts presented to the Tate by the painter in 1897. Creative Commons

Aaron Kent is an award-winning poet and publisher from Cornwall. Aaron is a working-class writer, and particularly wants to advocate for more working-class voices in literature. He has had several poetry pamphlets published, his debut collection, *Angels the Size of Houses*, is available from Shearsman Books, and his second collection, *The Working Classic*, is available with the87press.

Peadar 'King Badger' O'Donoghue writes things (that are a bit like poems) and takes photographs, tries to paint, to assemble things found on the beach, vainly tries to sleep. He co-edits all at PB Press with his wife Collette. His ambition is to be reborn as a badger. He has published two critically acclaimed collections, *Jewel*, with Salmon poetry, and *The Death of Poetry*, with PB Press. He has published poems all over the place, most recently in the *Irish Times*.

Scott Alsworth is a video game developer, political activist, and reviewer for the *Morning Star*. In 2009 he was shortlisted for the Geoffrey Dearmer prize. His work has appeared in *Poetry Review*, *Brittle Star*, *The Literary Review*, *Challenge* and the *Morning Star*, amongst other places. He lives in Norfolk and manages a co-development studio.

AVzounds are based in Teesside, UK, and work with spoken word performers. Amongst other projects, they are currently working with asylum seekers to help tell their stories, which will be set to music.

### **Note**

1 Mielville, *The Limits of Utopia*, Salvage, 2015.

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