

# COMMUNIST REVIEW 107

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Editorial *Martin Levy*

In defence of dialectical materialism Part I *KK Theckedath*

1st international conference of left theoretical journals *Jonathan White*

On the death of José Maria Sison *Ken Fuller*

**Fictitious Capital** *Martin Graham*

Xi Jinping and China's 21st century neo-Maoists *Sean Meleady*

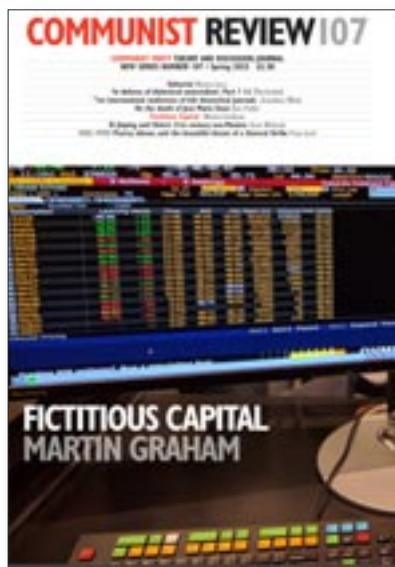
Enough is enough! We demand change! *Roger Waters*

Scope and stakes of the 'friendship' between Putin and Xi *Marc Vandepitte*

SOUL FOOD Poetry, labour, and the beautiful dream of a general strike *Fran Lock*

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## FICTITIOUS CAPITAL MARTIN GRAHAM



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#### errata

Our apologies: technical difficulties in the production of CR106 meant that there were a couple of minor omissions on page 12, at the end of the article, ‘Viewing decolonisation with a Marxist lens’, by Vijay Prashad. The missing endnote 1 is:

“Reproduced in the following pages of this issue of *CR*” and the complete end-bullet should read

“■ Transcribed by the *CR* editor from the video at <https://www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/events>, and published with permission.”

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# EDITORIAL

## MARTIN LEVY

3 May 2023

One major weakness of the British labour movement is the rejection of theory. Trade unions preceded the Labour Party; and, once the latter was founded, there developed a tendency to let its intellectuals determine the political and theoretical vision, while unions focused on the workplace. Of course, there have been honourable exceptions, such as the fights for peace and against fascism and discrimination, but in most cases unions' policy positions on such issues have arisen out of the campaigns and arguments from Communists and others on the left.

Time was when Labour Party leaders at least paid lip service to 'Socialism', although adopting a gradualist approach. However, with the repeated failure of social democracy in government, the 'S' word is long gone. During the interregnum of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, Labour did have elements of a programme which began to challenge the power of big business; but under Starmer there has been the return to an eclectic mix of policy soundbites, without any attempt at dealing comprehensively with the fundamental issues in society.

One of those issues, which we feature on our front cover, is fictitious capital – or, in other words, investment for speculation. This phenomenon is largely ignored on the left, let alone in broader labour movement circles. Yet investment in fictitious capital creates no wealth, in fact preventing expanded production. Is this just pure greed on the part of the super-rich? Not exactly. In this edition of *CR* Martin Graham undertakes an algebraic analysis of the growth of fictitious capital, which demonstrates that, if investment in commodity production, given existing rates of increase in labour productivity and productive labour wage rates, is insufficient to absorb all money capital, then the balance will be diverted into speculation. Furthermore, such speculation is actually encouraged by the tendency of central banks to seek to control the money supply in line with the general rate of inflation. Capitalism cannot solve this issue.

Rejection of theory also applies to the lack of understanding of imperialism, a feature common to most labour movements of advanced capitalist countries – countries which are generally imperialist, if subordinate to the “centre of the centres”, as Cuban theoretician Isabel Monal has characterised the USA (in a *CR* article<sup>1</sup> worth re-reading in the current situation). A correct analysis of imperialism was very much at the heart of the recent first international conference of theoretical publications of parties and movements of the left, held in Havana, Cuba, which Jonathan White reports on in these pages. His own speech at the conference, also printed here, identifies contradictions and challenges in imperialism today and underlines that there is no work more important than the struggle against imperialism, and for peace. The conference adopted an Action Plan, to which *CR* hopes to contribute in future.

On the peace issue, with specific reference to the Russia-

Ukraine war, we print here the speech given by musician Roger Waters to the United Nations Security Council in February. Waters is well-known for his support for Palestine, and has been pilloried for it. He supported Jeremy Corbyn in the 2019 general election, and in August 2022 stated publicly that Taiwan is part of China. His UN address is full of humanitarianism and internationalism, on behalf of the “voiceless” of the world.

Part and parcel of the lack of theory in our labour movement is also the absence of a correct understanding of China. As earlier articles in this journal have emphasised, that country is in the primary stage of socialist construction, but its economic expansion has been staggering. The degree to which it has used capitalist methods has been criticised by Chinese neo-Maoists, as Sean Meleady describes in his article here. But Marc Vandeputte shows that China is taking a leading role in forging a new multipolar world order, promoting both de-dollarisation in trade and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. China needs our solidarity against imperialist encirclement and provocations over Taiwan.

Our labour movement also lacks knowledge of its own history, which basically allows the ruling class to deny and rubbish the past achievements of working-class struggle. In introducing her Soul Food column here, Fran Lock muses on the current wave of strikes, with reference to the history of generalised strike action, from the 1926 General Strike to the TUC's call over the Pentonville Five in 1972, and the 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978-79. The myth has been perpetuated that the last was due to greedy and corrupt unions, always on strike, whereas it was in fact largely a matter of low-paid and marginalised workers – parallels with today? Indeed, no matter how downtrodden workers are, eventually there comes a point where, as Shakespeare wrote, “The smallest worm will turn”.<sup>2</sup> But there needs to be a context, or even a spark, to give workers confidence. As Fred Voss asks, and answers, in his poem presented by Fran, “Can revolutions start in washrooms?” Culture may even provide the spark.

Two more articles complete this edition of *CR*. First, Ken Fuller reflects critically on the legacy of the late José Maria Sison, leader of the Maoist-oriented Communist Party of the Philippines. But we start with a return to the fundamentals of dialectical materialism, by Indian Marxist KK Theckedath. His article can be read as a standalone defence and elaboration of basic Marxist philosophy, although it is in fact Part 1 of a longer article on the interpretation of microscopic physical systems. Part 2 will be published next time.

Technical difficulties have again delayed publication of this *CR*, but we still intend to have four editions out this year.

### Notes and References

- 1 Isabel Monal, 'Approaches to current imperialism', in *CR*94, Winter 2019/20, pp 12-18.
- 2 *Henry VI*, Part 3.

# PART ONE IN DEFENCE OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

KISHORE KUMAR  
THECKEDATH



“ Marxist materialism does not accept the position of various other philosophical systems which deny the possibility of knowing the world and its laws, or those systems which hold that there are ‘things in themselves’ that can never be known to science.”

## I

This essay has been prompted by two articles in *The Marxist* by T Jayaraman.<sup>1</sup> My defence of dialectical materialism is in the face of the impressions created in these articles that (a) Marxist philosophy needs friendly help from scientific realism to tackle certain problems in modern science, and especially in the area of quantum theory, and that (b) the categories of dialectics need to be drawn from a renewed study of Hegel so that dialectical laws are derived not from science (in view of the unsolved issues particularly in the field of quantum theory), or nature, but from a study of concepts, à la Hegel, starting from some basic concepts and moving on to more and more complex concepts.

I hope to be able to answer some of the questions raised, and to show that the philosophy of dialectical materialism stands on its own, and needs no outside support. My attempt will not be to go into the details of the proposed philosophy of scientific realism, but to merely show that the support of such a philosophy is not required by dialectical materialism. For this purpose we develop some of the basic ideas of dialectical materialism in the following section. We start from the non-duality of matter-mind and go on step by step to the laws of dialectics.

## II

### **Consciousness is a reflection of the material world**

In the Buldhana district of Maharashtra, some 80 miles from Malkapur railway station, is to be found the famous Lonar Crater *left*. It is an impact crater which, unlike a volcanic crater, is formed when a meteor or a meteorite collides with the Earth with a certain minimum speed. If a meteorite falls on to the ground with a speed not exceeding several hundred metres a second, it makes a hole not much larger than its own size. But when the speed is from two to four kilometers a second, both the meteorite and the ground it touches instantly turn into gas, and a huge crater is formed. The Lonar crater is one such. The Lonar crater was formed from such an impact which took place, according to the latest research figures, 576,000 +/- 47,000 years ago.<sup>2</sup> In such cases, the meteorite will reproduce several traces in the solid rock that is formed where it hit the earth. The trace left by the meteorite is its reflection resulting from its impact on the surface of the earth. This is an example of the *concept of reflection* which Lenin introduced as a way of understanding the evolution of matter into mind and consciousness.

In his seminal work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, written in 1908, Lenin attempts to give a materialist account of the development of matter in its evolution into consciousness. He identifies consciousness with a property of all matter, namely, the property of reflection. Lenin quotes from Karl Pearson's work *The Grammar of Science*, where the latter breaks away from Berkeley's arguments and speaks of the relation of brain to thought: "From will and consciousness associated with material machinery we can infer nothing whatever as to will and consciousness without that machinery". While quoting from Pearson again, Lenin inserts his own understanding about reflection within square brackets:

"Consciousness has no meaning beyond nervous systems akin to our own; it is illogical to assert that all matter is conscious [*but it is logical to assert that all matter possesses a property which is essentially akin to sensation, the property of reflection*], still more that consciousness or will can exist outside matter."<sup>3</sup>

This represents a profound contribution from Lenin to dialectical materialist philosophy. Let us briefly trace the development from reflection to irritability to mental activity in the evolution of matter.

We begin by defining the property of reflection which is a basic property of all matter: when one material object acts on another, the latter changes in such a way as to reproduce certain characteristics of the former. This is one of the forms of interaction, about which dialectics speaks, for Engels says in *Dialectics of Nature* that "everything affects and is affected by every other thing".<sup>4</sup> One important feature of this relation is that "an image cannot exist without the thing imaged, and the latter exists independently of that which images it."<sup>5</sup>

Lenin asks the question: Did nature exist prior to man? He gives the obvious answer:

"Natural science positively asserts that the Earth once existed in such a state that no man or any other creature existed on it. Organic matter is a later phenomenon, the fruit of a long evolution. It follows that there was no sentient matter, no 'complexes of sensations', no *self* that was supposedly 'indissolubly' connected with the environment in accordance with Avenarius' doctrine. Matter is primary, and thought, consciousness, sensation are products of a very high development. Such is the materialist theory of

knowledge, to which natural science instinctively subscribes.”<sup>6</sup>

Coming to evolution, we know that every living organism is characterised above all by metabolism, *ie* continued interchange of material with its surroundings. Another important characteristic is what is called ‘survivability’, meaning the capacity of a living organism to react to external influences in a way which increases the chances of its survival. Lastly, all living organisms are capable of growth and reproduction. The capacity of living bodies to survive is closely linked to the property of reflection which all matter possesses.

Every variation in an organism must require that the capacity to survive is strengthened. The capacity of a living organism to react to the environment in a way which helps it to survive is called irritability. On being stimulated, the organism *reflects* those characteristics of the external phenomena which increase or decrease its chances of persisting in a living state, and transforms these *reflections* into internal processes (chemical or physical) to effect a response essential to self-preservation. This quality of living organisms emerged in the process of natural selection. Those organisms lived and multiplied, which were built in such a way that their reactions to the environment provided for their preservation. All others died out.

In more highly organised animals, a special tissue develops whereby an organism’s responses increasingly anticipate external phenomena. This is the *nervous* system. An anticipatory reflection effected through the nervous system is called *a reflex*. Reflections which appear, are transmitted, stored, processed and retrieved are called information. Information not only circulates within a living organism but is passed on from generation to generation, thus ensuring transmission of qualities by heredity. Heredity operates through molecules, of which the living cells consist.

There is no reason to suppose that in plants, viruses, and the simplest unicellular animals, reflection is accompanied by sensation or emotion. Only irritability is present, not even the most primitive form of mental activity such as sensation. Rudiments of mental activity are found in more highly organised, multi-celled animals. Most of these have a centralised nervous system which regulates their responses to stimuli and coordinates their movements. Reflection in living matter which does not show mental activity merely consists in the differentiation of stimuli as favourable or unfavourable.

Hundreds of millions of years of natural selection have resulted in reflections of the characteristics of what is going on in the external world (sensations) and motivations to attain favourable and avoid harmful objects. Both sensations and motivations are activities of a specific individual organism, and are classed as mental activity. These are subjective experiences. However, Lenin was quick to point out that sensations exist, but there are no such things as “fictitious sensations, nobody’s sensations”,<sup>7</sup> which stresses the fact that every sensation must be somebody’s sensation.

With highly organised animals the significance of mental activity as a regulator of behaviour increases. So does the importance of the brain, a special organ which controls unlearned forms of behaviour. Even among the higher animals, the part played by the brain is not the same, but the brain plays a greater and greater part as the internal organisation of the animal becomes more complex.

## Labour, language and thought

In June 1876 Engels wrote the brilliant article *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*. He showed step by step how in the evolution of man from the anthropoid apes labour played an important role: “we have to say that labour created man himself”.<sup>8</sup>

He takes us through the erect posture, which was a decisive step in the transition from ape to man. This freed the hand from locomotion for other tasks, which we begin to see even in the apes:

“Before the first flint could be fashioned into a knife by human hands, a period of time probably elapsed in comparison with which the historical period known to us appears insignificant. But the first step had been taken, *the hand had become free ...*”<sup>9</sup>

Engels goes on to explain that the hand is not only the organ of labour, it is also the product of labour.

From the development of the hand, and the gregariousness of man, the most social of all animals, Engels shows how the mastery of nature increased. The development of labour necessarily helped to bring the members of society closer together by increasing cases of mutual support and joint activity, and by making clear the advantage of this joint activity to each individual. In short, men in the making arrived at a point where they had something to say to each other. The origin of speech and language is explained from and in the process of labour. “First labour, after it and then with it speech – these were the two most essential stimuli under the influence of which the brain of the ape gradually changed into that of man.”<sup>10</sup> The development of senses, along with this, hearing and sight, are then taken up by Engels. But let us leave this here.

Coming to a more modern textbook,<sup>11</sup> it is shown that to be able to fashion and use implements and kill large animals, primitive men had to act jointly and circulate information of ever greater variety and scope. Such information must be equally understandable to all. And, if it is of a multiple nature, then the signal (speech) conveying it must be such as to indicate not unique but diverse phenomena that possess, at the same time, such common characteristics as must produce a uniform response in every member of the community. The signal must be common to a class of things, as well as to all those involved in a common effort. Hence, the information conveyed by a signal is not a sensuous image, but a concept, a general idea; and the signal itself is a word by which the idea is expressed.

The concept of a tree, for example, contains no reference to its height etc. However, we cannot imagine a tree without a height. The word ‘tree’ denotes the class of all trees. This is why Lenin wrote: “Every word (speech) already *universalises*.”<sup>12</sup> He was referring to Feuerbach, who said that we come across a contradiction between the word which represents the universal and the thing which is a particular. Of course, alongside this statement, Lenin also gave the other aspect of this observation: “The senses show reality; thought and word – the universal.”

There are experiments to show that concepts cannot be formed even by highest (anthropoid) apes. Consider the following example:

“By imitating people, a chimpanzee learned to get

bananas surrounded by burning candles. He turned on the tap, filled a mug full of water and extinguished the candles. He could also cross a pond using a raft and pole. Once, when he was brought to the pond, there was a raft with a pole at the bank, while in the middle of the pond, there was another raft with some bananas on it. All round the bananas were lighted candles, and beside them stood the familiar mug. The chimpanzee got on the first raft and reached the other raft. Picking up the mug, he got back to the bank, ran up to the tap, turned it on, filled the mug and hurried back to the pond with it, intending to put out the candles with the tap water. He proved incapable of abstracting from the distinction between water running from the tap and water in the pond and form the image of water as such. Even a five-year old child, when it uses one word ‘water’ to describe that which runs from the tap, that which fills a pond and that which falls from the sky as rain, has the notion of water as such.”<sup>13</sup>

With the concepts that were available to man, thanks to this capacity engendered by labour, he is able to go through a process of *reasoning*: if I bring one kind of stone to bear on another, I shall obtain an object with which, by using it in a certain way, I shall be able to kill a certain kind of game. Thus the development of thinking and reasoning in man is seen as an evolution of matter, without the admixture of any foreign element. Lenin’s concept of the property of reflection, that is a property of all matter, is seen to evolve into the mental process of thinking and reasoning in man.

The connection between labour, language and thought has been briefly described here. We have also referred to Lenin’s description of the “word” as that which universalises. The ultimate relation between the actual world and the world of thought has been described by Marx and Engels as a relation mediated by language, and they point to the difficulty faced by philosophers due to this very fact. In *The German Ideology* they say:

“One of the most difficult tasks confronting philosophers is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world. *Language* is the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they were bound to make language into an independent realm. This is the secret of philosophical language, in which thoughts in the form of words have their own content. The problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world is turned into the problem of descending from language to life.”<sup>14</sup>

How prophetic these words are, when we consider the development of *postmodernism*, which reduces human history to a collection of narratives (please see Part 2), and philosophies of socialism and classless societies into grand narratives in the postmodernist world of discourses!

Coming back to the development of consciousness from labour, language and thought, we come to the evolution of relationships like the subject-object relationship. Scientists have shown that in the case of animals, the animal’s physical condition, mental experience, reactions and results, as well as the environment, have an effect of the animal as an integral whole. The French philosopher and psychologist (in the field of social psychology) Henri Wallon showed by conducting a series of experiments that for an animal, the

“subjective and objective factors form an indivisible unity”.<sup>15</sup> However man, in the process of labour, masters some connections of the external world, and some connections between his own and other workers’ efforts. The ability to discriminate between the reflections of the environment and of oneself becomes important in the labour process. Man owes this capacity to detach himself from the environment to social relations that develop in the process of labour. The subject and object relationship therefore has its roots in this evolutionary process.

### Matter and mind

We have seen above how the mind, with its capacity for sensation and for reasoning, arises; namely, in the process of evolution from lifeless matter to living matter, through irritability, and the development of the nervous system, through social labour, language and the development of the human brain. However, this does not mean for a moment that the mind or consciousness is ‘less’ real. Thus we have Lenin: “It is, of course, sheer nonsense to say that materialism ever maintained that consciousness is ‘less’ real, or necessarily professed a ‘mechanical’, and not an electromagnetic, or some other, immeasurably more complex, picture of the world of moving matter.”<sup>16</sup>

The definition of matter was given by Lenin by first saying that, while in the question of the priority of matter to mind there can be no doubt that matter comes first and mind arises out of matter, yet, “The difference of the ideal from the material is also not unconditional, not *überschwenglich* [inordinate]”.<sup>17</sup> He defines matter by asking a simple question:

“We ask, is a man given objective reality when he sees something red or feels something hard, etc, or not? This hoary philosophical query is confused by Mach .... If you hold that it is given, a philosophical concept is needed for this objective reality, and this concept has been worked out long, long ago. This concept is *matter*. *Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is given to man by his sensations, and which is copied, photographed and reflected by our sensations, while existing independently of them.*”<sup>18</sup> [my emphasis –KKT]

A careful examination of Lenin’s definition of matter shows that there are two parts in it. The first part of the definition deals with objective reality. Objective reality is everything that has existed in the real world, that exists and of necessity will exist in future. It is the entire universe in its mutual transitions and transformations which exist independently of consciousness.

The second part of the definition gives a clear-cut answer to a basic question of philosophy with regard to the relationship between matter and consciousness. The definition asserts that the world is cognisable, that it is knowable.

Indeed, dialectical materialism holds that the world is cognisable. It differs from all other epistemological positions by insisting that the yardstick of knowledge is social practice. The cognitive act includes (1) the object of cognition, (2) experimentation or man’s action on the object with the aid of instruments, tools *etc* and (3) knowledge as a reflection of the object’s qualities and distinctive properties discovered during experimentation. Earlier philosophical systems described the cognitive act as a two-fold relation, of the object concerned and knowledge. These systems lacked a

yardstick by which their positions could be verified. Dialectical materialism approached the problem from an entirely different standpoint, shifting the emphasis to the material basis and objective yardstick of knowledge.

Marxist materialism does not accept the position of various other philosophical systems which deny the possibility of knowing the world and its laws, or those systems which hold that there are “things in themselves” that can never be known to science. The position of dialectical materialism can be judged from the following words of Engels (in *Ludwig Feuerbach*):

“The most telling refutation of this as of all other philosophical fancies is practice, *viz*, experiment and industry. If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and using it for our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end of the Kantian incomprehensible ‘thing in itself’.”<sup>19</sup>

### Categories of dialectical materialism

Philosophy is concerned with the following ultimate concepts: matter and mind, motion and rest, general and particular, substance and phenomena, quality and quantity, cause and effect, necessity and chance, possibility and reality, content and form, structure and function, and so on. These ultimate concepts are called categories. Lenin remarks in his *Conspectus of Hegel’s ‘Science of Logic’*:

“How is this to be understood? Man is confronted with a web of natural phenomena. Instinctive man, the savage, does not distinguish himself from nature. Conscious man does distinguish, categories are stages of distinguishing, *ie* of cognising the world, focal points in the web, which assist in cognising and mastering it.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus categories are taken out of nature. They are not spun out of one’s head, or given *a priori* to man, as the philosopher Kant had stated.

Similar is the case of the process of reasoning and the forms of logic. These also arise from man’s evolution over thousands of years and his social practice. Lenin states in the same book:

“... man’s practice, repeating itself a thousand million times, becomes consolidated in man’s consciousness by figures of logic. Precisely (and only) on account of this thousand-million-fold repetition, these figures have the stability of a prejudice, an axiomatic character.”<sup>21</sup>

Further, in connection with the cause-effect relationship, Lenin refers to Engels to illustrate how the laws of thought correspond with the laws of nature. We have the following in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*:

“If we find that the laws of thought correspond with the laws of nature, says Engels, this becomes quite conceivable when we take into account that reason and consciousness are ‘products of the human brain and that man himself is a product of nature.’ Of course, ‘the products of the human brain, being in the last analysis also products of nature, do not contradict the rest of nature’s interconnections ....’”<sup>22</sup>

### The Laws of Dialectical Materialism

Keeping in mind the main task before us, namely of showing how dialectical materialism on its own is able to deal with the developments of science, and needs no support from any philosophy like the philosophy of scientific realism, we skip any detailed exposition of the laws of dialectical materialism, but merely mention them. The main laws enunciated by Engels are: the law of transition of quantity into quality; the law of negation of the negation; and the law of unity and conflict of opposites. In his ‘Plan Outlines’ of the book *Dialectics of Nature*, Engels gives the following telegraphic description:

“Dialectics as the science of universal interconnection. Main laws: transformation of quantity and quality – mutual penetration of polar opposites and transformation into each other when carried to extremes – development through contradiction or negation of the negation – spiral form of development.”<sup>23</sup>

Keeping in mind Comrade EMS Namboodiripad’s<sup>24</sup> advice that dialectics is a developing science, we should not forget to add that several additions have been made to this list. For example, Lenin emphasised that the law of unity and conflict of opposites is the defining law of dialectics:

“In brief, dialectics can be defined as the doctrine of the unity of opposites. This embodies the essence of dialectics ....”<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, both the law of transition from quantity to quality and that of the negation of the negation may be regarded as particular instances of the law of unity and conflict of opposites, which reveals the source of all development.<sup>26</sup> Lenin added to this list the law of reflection as an essential property of all matter. Trying to defend Feuerbach about his limitations, Engels had pointed out that the sciences themselves had not developed sufficiently when Feuerbach was writing, and then listed three important discoveries in the field of science that had suggested the laws of dialectics to Marx and himself. Taking this argument a step further, we may add that Lenin was able to understand and grasp the great discoveries of science in the first decade of the twentieth century, including the work of Einstein, and was therefore able to contribute a new law of dialectics when he said:

“The ‘essence’ of things, or ‘substance’, is *also* relative; it expresses only the degree of profundity of man’s knowledge of objects: and while yesterday the profundity of this knowledge did not go beyond the atom, and today does not go beyond the electron and ether, dialectical materialism insists on the temporary, relative, approximate character of all these *milestones* in the knowledge of nature gained by the progressing science of man. The electron is as *inexhaustible* as the atom, nature is infinite but it infinitely exists. And it is this sole categorical, this sole unconditional recognition of nature’s *existence* outside the mind and perception of man that distinguishes dialectical materialism from relativist agnosticism and idealism.”<sup>27</sup>

In this series of additions, we may add the simple but authentic exposition of dialectical materialism in the book A

*Short History of the CPSU (Bolsheviks)*, the contributions of Mao Zedong in his book *On Contradiction*, as well as the critical comments on contradictions, antagonistic and non-antagonistic, made by the Indian Marxist M Basavapunniah<sup>28</sup>.

Marx and Engels were scientists working with an open mind. Descartes is often portrayed as a dualist philosopher, and so having nothing to do with materialism. But in *The Holy Family* Marx and Engels write:

“We shall merely say the following: *Descartes* in his physics endowed *matter* with self-creative power and conceived *mechanical* motion as the manifestation of its life. He completely separated his *physics* from his *metaphysics*. *Within* his physics, *matter* is the sole *substance*, the sole basis of being and of knowledge.”<sup>29</sup>

Here was deposited the seed of dialectics, the refutation of dualism, and the endowing of matter with the capacity of evolving consciousness and *knowledge*.

The joint contribution of Marx and Engels to the development of dialectics, as well as the fact that dialectics cannot be separated from matter, has to be emphasised. We cannot separate dialectics from materialism. There can be no question of merely asserting a certain mechanical unity of dialectics and materialism.

This scientific openness of the founders of the science of dialectical materialism needs to be stressed because there is a new discipline today of the philological study of Marx and Engels, which takes the job of comparing different works of these writers and finds contradictory positions in their formulations on important questions. This exercise completely ignores the fact that dialectics is an evolving science, and to the final works of Marx and Engels are added the creative contributions of Lenin and others.

■ This article comprises sections I and II of the article of similar title which appeared in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) theoretical journal, *The Marxist*, Vol XXX, part 2, April–June 2014. It is reproduced here by permission, and Sections III and IV will appear as Part 2 in the next issue of *CR*. Citations and explanatory notes here have been added by the *CR* editor. In the course of compiling those citations and notes, it has been discovered that around 20% of the text, in various places in this article, and without citation, has been taken from Boguslavsky et al’s *ABC of Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (see Note 11). That work however is now out of print.

## Notes and References

- 1 T Jayaraman, ‘Scientific Realism for the Materialist’, in *The Marxist*, Vol XXIII, part 1, Jan-Mar 2007, and ‘Dialectics and Materialism’ in *ibid*, Vol XXIX, No 4, Oct-Dec 2013. These articles are available at <https://cpim.org/the-marxist>.
- 2 Revised figures, according to sources cited at [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lonar\\_Lake](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lonar_Lake). The author’s original was “about 656,000 years ago”.
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- 4 Engels, *Dialectics of Nature (DN): The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man*, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)*, Vol 25, p 459.
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- 10 *Ibid*, p 455.
- 11 BM Boguslavsky, VA Karpushin, AI Rakitov, VY Chertikhin and GI Bzrin, *ABC of Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, pp 141-3, facsimile online at <https://archive.org/details/ABCDialecticalHistoricalMaterialism/page/n119/mode/2up0>; also available as pdf at [https://ia801800.us.archive.org/8/items/ABCDialecticalHistoricalMaterialism\\_cleaned/ABC%20of%20Dialectical%20and%20Historical%20Materialism.pdf](https://ia801800.us.archive.org/8/items/ABCDialecticalHistoricalMaterialism_cleaned/ABC%20of%20Dialectical%20and%20Historical%20Materialism.pdf), p 55.
- 12 Lenin, *Conspectus of Hegel’s Book, ‘Lectures on the History of Philosophy’ [in his Works.] Volume XIV – Volume II of The History of Philosophy*; in *LCW*, Vol 38, p 274. The Feuerbach reference is to §28 of his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*.
- 13 Boguslavsky et al, *op cit*, pp 143-4 (facsimile), p 55 (pdf).
- 14 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, Ch III, Sect 2, ‘Apologetical Commentary’; in *MECW*, Vol 5, p 446.
- 15 Cited in Boguslavsky et al, p 147 (facsimile), p 57 (pdf).
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- 20 Lenin, *Conspectus of Hegel’s Science of Logic: Preface to the 2nd Edition*, in *LCW*, Vol 38, p 92.
- 21 *Ibid*, Book 3, Sect 3, in *LCW*, Vol 38, p 217.
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- 23 Engels, *DN*, in *MECW*, Vol 25, p 313.
- 24 EMS Namboodiripad (13.06.1909-19.03.1998) was one of the foremost leaders of the Communist movement in India and one of the founding leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). He was chief minister of Kerala 1957-59 and 1967-69 and was general secretary of the central committee of the CPI(M) from 1977 to 1992.
- 25 Lenin, *Conspectus of Hegel’s Science of Logic: Book 3, Sect 3*, in *LCW*, Vol 38, p 222.
- 26 Boguslavsky et al, pp 183-4 (facsimile), p 70 (pdf).
- 27 Lenin, *MEC*, Ch 5 Sect 2, in *LCW*, Vol 14, p 262.
- 28 Makineni Basavapunniah (14.12.1914-12.04.1992) was an Indian Communist leader who was a member of Politburo of the CPI(M), and the editor of its central organ, *People’s Democracy*.
- 29 Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, Ch 6, Part 3, Sect d), in *MECW*, Vol 4, p 125.



# FIRST CONFERENCE OF THEORETICAL JOURNALS OF PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS OF THE LEFT JONATHAN WHITE



On 10-12 February 2023, delegates from 36 countries gathered in Havana for a conference of theoretical publications of parties and movements of the left, convened by *Cuba Socialista*, the journal of the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). Cuba accounted for 50 delegates, and there were around 100 others from the following countries, in order of the weight of their delegation: China (*Peoples' Daily*), Venezuela, Colombia, Spain, Greece, Canada, Portugal, Argentina, Britain, Mexico, Peru, Belgium, India, Russia, the USA, Guyana, Germany, Indonesia, the DPRK and Kenya. Communist Parties were strongly represented, from Cuba, Venezuela, China, Greece, Argentina, Spain, Portugal, Colombia, Denmark, Britain, Kenya, the DPRK and India, in the last case through Thomas Isaac from the CPI(M) central committee.

THE CONFERENCE was organised into three sessions themed around 'Imperialism', 'Solidarity and the Legacy of Fidel Castro' and 'Socialism and Youth'. The opening session examined contemporary imperialism. British writer and theorist John Smith, author of *Imperialism in the 21st Century*,<sup>1</sup> argued that two things enabled capitalism to get out of the crisis of the 1970s: the use of debt, which tripled as a multiple of total production; and the internationalisation of production, which was the most important development within the global capitalist economy – capital and commodities can cross borders and only workers cannot. He argued that this enables capitalists to cheat the law of value and the tendency of the rate of profit to equalise, by moving production, thus creating the basis for imperialism. He also argued that this is not presaged in Marx, who assumed an integral capitalist economy without monopolies. Smith presented his argument as a synthesis of Lenin and Marx, in uniting the theory of imperialism and the law of value.

Cuban philosopher Isabel Monal *left* pressed Smith to discuss further the periodisation of capitalism and the understanding of imperialism. She identified two tendencies within imperialism: a Kautskyite (*ie* 'ultra-imperialist') tendency and a Leninist rivalry tendency. She argued that, within contemporary imperialism, Lenin was vindicated but that the two tendencies

continue to coexist, and arise from the essential nature of capitalist development, rooted in Marx's conception. She posed the question of whether we are now in a new stage of imperialism or a new phase of the same stage, saying she believed the latter. She talked about the importance of highlighting the continued role of the state, not just as an apparatus but as a locus of imperialist politics, intervening internationally and using the concept of the 'failed state' as a justification.

One of the Cuban speakers characterised the current phase of imperialism as an infinitely more violent and aggressive phase in which the US is losing its pre-eminence and overheating as its system of control collapses. There is, he said, no way that China could replicate the kind of power that Washington exerts – it does not have the military capacity, so the world is by default becoming multipolar. The US has in just a few years destroyed the EU as a serious imperialist competitor, fracturing its relations with Russia and its oil and gas, and lining it up behind a war in Ukraine that can only drain the EU; in fact, transnational corporations are leaving the EU because of the ruptures within it. Europe is likely to

become a US protectorate against a lesser military power in Russia. In its decline the US is using soft power to generate coups through its doctrine of interventions in 'failed states'.

The session on 'Solidarity and Fidel' was led by speakers emphasising the importance of Castro as a pre-eminent theorist and practitioner of solidarity. This was related to Cuba's early reliance on international solidarity and its sense of the power of that as a unifying weapon for the countries of the Third World in particular. Isabel Monal insisted on the need to understand Fidel's thought as combining two elements: national revolutionary practice, inherited from the revolutionary anti-colonial traditions of Latin America and the Caribbean; and Marxism-Leninism. Others claimed Fidel as the greatest Marxist thinker of all time in Latin America, at least, with one claiming that he had a creative conception of revolution as the art of government directed against imperialism.

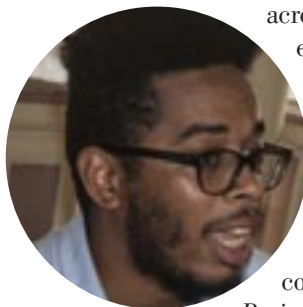
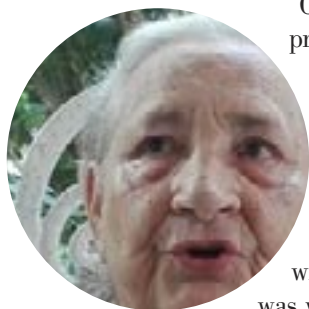
The session on 'Socialism and Youth' featured Cuban academic Marxlenin Pérez Valdés *below* and Manolo de los Santos *below* from the New York People's Forum. Both reflected on the way

in which capitalism destroys the material future of young people, and colonises and degrades their potential in the present.

Young people, it was stressed, are a cultural battlefield and socialists must fight to present a future in which they are urged to think and hope, counteracting the culture of vanity, indifference and apathy that is marketed to them through the media and across the cultural battlefield. Every generation of young people has to look around and find in the dogmas of their time their own historical mission.

In each session delegates were invited to make contributions from the floor in addition to submitting written papers. I was called to make a contribution on behalf of *Communist Review* shortly before the third session ended

and spoke<sup>2</sup> on the need to build on and foster the material roots of solidarity as they arise within the capitalist mode of production, along production chains that span countries in the age of transnational corporations, and on the basis of the enduring revolutionary states as they construct economic relationships of new kinds. I also mentioned the important struggles in imperialist states to detach labour movements from adherence to imperial-



ism, and noted that the rising levels of class struggle in Britain and the crisis of living standards have provided us with new opportunities to wage the battle of ideas for popular sovereignty, against imperialism and for solidarity, notions which I noted have little resonance for a generation of working people in imperialist metropolises.

### President Díaz-Canel arrives

On the first afternoon, the importance that the Cubans attached to the conference was demonstrated when President Díaz-Canel arrived unannounced. Díaz-Canel *right with Booker Omole from the Communist Party of Kenya* was defiant in defence of Cuban democracy:

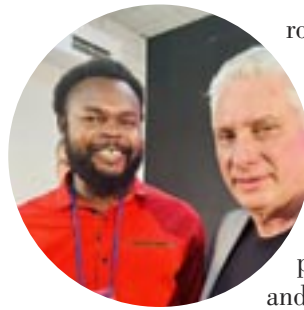
After listening to several speakers from the floor, he himself spoke for around an hour in a wide-ranging talk, dwelling on the need for greater unity and greater articulation of our debates on the essential issues facing working-class peoples of the world. He insisted that the left should be self-critical and ask what comes out of these conferences, for the people? Each conference must have a plan of action and deliver against that plan. It must also have a wide base in social movements and popular movements, to ensure that it speaks to and represents the widest possible range of the people.

Díaz-Canel also spoke about how Covid had shown the contradictions of capitalism, shattering the neoliberal paradigm. No neoliberal country's healthcare systems had held up against the pandemic. The rich have become richer and the poor poorer. He said he had hoped that the pandemic would lead to more cooperation, but in fact the reverse had happened. Powerful countries had imposed more sanctions upon weaker ones, and had commenced a drive to war. The US empire, he said, is in profound crisis and is resorting to war and military-industrial spending to get itself out, exporting the crisis beyond its borders. It had engaged in unparalleled propaganda and lies to support its interventions, while fascist parties and ideas are growing. "Traps are being set for us," he said, recounting how the US had attempted to convene a Summit of the Americas without Cuba, Venezuela or Nicaragua. This had been frustrated, however, by the Mexican government and others telling the US that this should not happen again.

Turning to the outcomes of the Havana conference, he said that the PCC uses science of all kinds to support all its party work: "We have ideological workers working on all kinds of problems in Cuba and this gives us the opportunity to create a platform of principles and ideas we're trying to get implemented." Imperialism has its brutal media platforms with a culture industry that promotes banality and vulgarity, cultural domination and 'colonisation'. We have to find answers to this on the left. We have to replace this capitalist logic with socialist logic. And we need to be convinced that we can do this and that a better world is possible, and so demand of ourselves commitment, kindness and devotion. Our history is full of examples of this, he argued. Castro and Chavez are examples.

The blockade, he said, is suffocating Cuba, causing immense difficulties:

"We realise the evil behind this and we feel in our flesh the imperialist injustice of the blockade. We resist with socialist justice, using and developing the talents of our people. We vaccinated all our people, one of 17 nations who did this. In neoliberal economies, hundreds of thousands of people died and were just numbers. We stopped our economy, to save lives, and we did it. Yet we are now on the list of ter-



rorist states on the pretext that we hosted a visit of some FARC guerrillas,<sup>3</sup> This has real consequences as it stops other states and economic entities trading normally with us."

"Our policy is built on socialist democracy. We don't want a multi-party democracy, we want to enhance and defend and perfect our socialist democracy. Socialist democracy also means intervening to defend people's livelihoods. In the face of price inflation we have not done what the neoliberal economies have done and just let prices go up, we've put in place price controls to protect the people."

The president finished by talking about the need for solidarity and unity:

"We believe in solidarity, not just as something you give, but something you learn from. We sent doctors to Lombardy because that was solidarity, but we learned from them on their return, and they helped us develop our pandemic response. Solidarity is not words: it is a system of feelings and concrete deeds. The highest expression of this was what we did in Africa. We did not go to Angola for money or diamonds, and when we left we took nothing with us. We need unity of the left in action. I am calling on you to build, without sectarianism and chauvinism, unity with diversity. We each have things we can teach each other. We need to use our existing networks, renovate some of our old ones and build with militant organisation, with all who share our ideas. Young people from across the world are embracing Marxism. We must act now in real time, in each of our countries, to enhance our communication with people. We must publish, build a library of the best of the left, we must develop apps and communications for young people. Each of us must have a digital sixth sense."

### Theory and practice and the Action Plan

Although this was a theoretical conference there was constant return to the importance of turning theoretical insight into practical action that can guide mass struggle. Vijay Prashad talked about the work of Tricontinental Institute, noting that it was premised on the recognition that the institutions of internationalism have suffered in the era of neoliberalism. Some efforts were made to address this in the World Social Forum, but they did not leave anything lasting. The Institute tries to be a modest part of rejuvenating internationalism by establishing networks to confront international bourgeois thought. This includes creating an international union of left publishers and ideologically developing the *Ten Theses on Marxism and Decolonisation*<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, he said, social life has been degraded through modern patterns of work and consumption.

There is a need to work to rebuild collective life. Prashad namechecked the 'Red Book Day' in Kerala in which millions read the *Communist Manifesto* together.

Kris González, *left* former Venezuelan ambassador to Bolivia before being expelled during the coup, now living in Bolivia again, and editing *Correo del Alba*, made an interest-



ing contribution on the need to think hard about the form in which the practical actions arising from the conference are communicated. She stressed the need for inclusivity of language and attention to the forms of new media, in order to communicate quickly with young people, whose principal means of communication is through smart phones. Whatever initiative comes out, she said, there should be a network of media with agreed protocols, a bank of sources of information, agreed research methodologies for new researchers approaching new problems, and finance to back it.

The meeting ended after three full days with a proposal to accept by consensus a statement circulated by the PCC in the name of the conference. The contents of this had been flagged earlier by President Díaz-Canel and the statement showed signs of having been amended in the course of the conference by a couple of concrete suggestions. The Action Plan<sup>5</sup> included:

- Denounce and combat cultural neocolonialism, defend historical memory and disseminate the work of the heroes and martyrs for the independence and social justice of the peoples of the South.
- Create a group of editors that articulates with the Network in Defense of Humanity<sup>6</sup>, a movement that campaigns on several fronts, including anti-imperialism, anticapitalism, antifascism, social justice, peace and respect for the environment.
- Exchange texts and arrange co-publication of works of common interest.
- Create a digital library of the best thought on the left, and use digital platforms for popular dissemination, particularly towards the young.

- Develop common research and investigation strategies to counter the media war of imperialism.
- Identify sources of finance to support this work.
- Convene a second conference in Caracas in November 2023 and a third in Havana again in February 2024, on the 65th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution.
- Permanently maintain the denunciation of the US blockade against Cuba, and support the holding, in Brussels, of an International Tribunal against the blockade, in the last quarter of 2023
- Support the Red Book Day on 21 February each year, the anniversary of the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*, with lectures and readings in cities across the world.
- Hold a grand mobilisation for peace on 21 September.

This was accepted as the will of the majority of delegates and the conference ended. The meeting was a fascinating and potentially vital initiative from the Cubans. Their proposal is in essence an ideological international United Front with a programme of concrete actions that could develop greater theoretical power and resources for the forces of the left internationally.

### Notes and References

- 1 Monthly Review Press, 2016.
- 2 *Vide infra*, this issue, pp 12-14.
- 3 Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.
- 4 See CR106, Winter 2022/23, pp 22-27.
- 5 <https://www.granma.cu/mundo/2023-02-12/el-acento-de-las-fuerzas-de-la-izquierda-mundial-esta-en-la-batalla-de-ideas-frente-al-imperialismo-12-02-2023-23-02-55>
- 6 <https://indefenseofhumanity.org>



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# IMPERIALISM: CONTRADICTIONS AND CHALLENGES

## JONATHAN WHITE



**Contribution from the Communist Party of Britain to the 1st Conference of Theoretical Publications of Parties and Movements of the Left, Havana, Cuba, 10-11 February 2023**

I WISH TO extend my thanks for the invitation to participate on behalf of *Communist Review*, the theoretical journal of the Communist Party of Britain. I want to make general remarks about the theory of imperialism and then proceed to give some illustrations, briefly, of how Britain's Communists have historically applied this theory to their political work.

### **The development of the Marxist theory of imperialism**

Marxist theory is and must be the summing up of the experience of struggle of the working class, its crystallisation into theory on the basis of the Marxist world view and its application and testing against reality through struggle. Our Marxist theory must be constantly evolving to reflect and express the experience of struggle that is thrown up by the contradictory developments within global capitalism.

The Marxist theory of imperialism emerged at the beginning of the 20th century as Marxists struggled to develop revolutionary strategy in response to the emergence of a distinctive new phase of capitalist development. Expansionist states sought to divide

and redivide the world between them, accumulating vast territorial empires that brought the peoples of the world under the political control of capitalist states and began the work of building a world economy dominated by capitalist relations of production, distribution and exchange. These expansionist states drove toward war in their rivalry, culminating in the First World War, a war fought primarily across Europe but whose disastrous effects were felt throughout the world. Marxists had to understand these developments. But they also had to understand why the powerful movements of organised labour were divided and their political parties, many nominally committed to socialist transformation, supported the war and supported their states' empires.

This, of course, is one of the great historical ideological achievements of Lenin and the Bolsheviks – to bequeath to us a theory of imperialism that relates these superstructural political phenomena to developments within the basis of European and US capitalism. Above all, Lenin located the drive to imperialism in the general tendency toward the formation of monopolies on the basis of the laws of concentration and centralisation of capital identified by Marx.

Exploitative empires had long been a critical feature of capitalist development and the formation of a world market from the 17th century onwards, part of the primitive accumulation of capital described by Marx. But the emergence of monopolies and the sharpening domestic class struggles over surplus value fuelled increasing export of capital. Monopolies increasingly used their market position to extract super-profits, investing overseas in the search for markets and raw materials and increasingly connected to finance capital and the state. Profits flowed into the imperial metropolises, creating layers of the working class in these states whose fortunes were tied in some measure to these empires, and who consequently became attached to both empire and reformism. Imperialism and all its features, Lenin argued, is an inevitable consequence of the emergence of monopoly capitalism, itself rooted in the deeper contradictory developments within the capitalist mode of production.

The great validation of Lenin's Marxist theory was of course the fact that it gained material force in a revolutionary situation, shaping the decisive action of the Bolsheviks in seizing and holding state power and inaugurating the era of the socialist political challenge and the national liberation struggle against colonialism. The seizure of state power in Russia, the formation of the Soviet Union and the great Chinese Revolution which culminated in the seizure of state power in 1949 transformed the world balance of power and created new contradictions and antagonisms at a world level. States attempting to build socialist relations of production interacted with the states and empires based on the capitalist mode. These developments altered the features of imperialism in ways that Marxists needed to understand and analyse anew.

During the course of the 20th century, the Communist International argued that, in struggling to maintain class power and contain or moderate the contradictions of monopoly capitalism, the major capitalist states consolidated the tendencies that created a new phase of capitalist development: state monopoly capitalism. In this phase, the state intervened directly to ensure the reproduction of capitalism, taking control of productive capital and restructuring it, using taxation and monetary policy to redistribute surplus value to monopolies as well as creating welfare and education systems that answered some of the aspirations of working people while reinforcing the position of the leading monopolies and wiping out smaller capitals in the process. Monopolies sought to internationalise their operations, not just

seeking markets or raw materials overseas but internationalising production.

The forms and contradictions of imperialism developed to reflect this. A retreat from formal empire and decolonisation, fought for and won through heroic national liberation struggles with the assistance of the Soviet Union and China, saw the emergence of neocolonialism, in which foreign-owned capital sought to:

- capture and control independent states through alliances with domestic bourgeoisies,
- disarm and divide labour movements, and
- weaken democratic control of economies through greater resort to treaties and trade agreements, thereby weakening the ability of working classes to exert pressure on states.

An architecture of international organisations arose across the 20th century that could express the general interests of capitalist states against their working classes or the socialist states. Inter-imperialist rivalries could surface and be played out within these organisations or could be articulated through wars of cataclysmic scale.

Domestic working classes in the imperialist states continued to benefit from the transfer of surplus value from dominated nations, while state monopoly capitalism created new objectives for class struggle that could also become the ends of reformist politics. This led them to ignore the imperialist character of their states as well as its basic function in reproducing capitalist class power. National liberation movements often divided in response to these developments.

It was Communist Parties who theorised these developments and struggled across the world to win greater understanding of the achievements of the socialist states, to weaken the grip of social democracy, reformism and its imperialist assumptions on labour movements in the imperialist metropolises and to strengthen socialist tendencies within national liberation movements.

The historic reverse of the period between 1989 and 1992, which saw the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism in Russia and Eastern Europe, has immeasurably intensified the difficulty of this work, shifting the balance of forces globally and within each nation. Now once, again, we must ensure that our theory is renewed and based on the same principles set out by Lenin and Marx:

- The great fundamental underpinning of imperialism remains the same: monopoly economic power, articulated through a state that directly intervenes to ensure continued capitalist accumulation. In the capitalist world, monopoly power has become more closely entangled with finance capital, fictitious capital and money markets. The most concentrated expression of these tendencies is the USA, which attempts to exercise economic hegemony through the dollar's domination of international money markets and military hegemony through the deployment of its vast military resources around the world and its sponsorship of brutal proxy wars.
- The socialist transitional states of China, Vietnam, Cuba, Laos and the DPRK still exist, their state apparatuses remaining in the hands of parties of the working class. Accommodations with the resurgent capitalist world have had to be made, to ensure that the possibility of a fuller transition remains open, but their existence and the prodigious growth of Chinese productive forces threaten the hegemony of US imperialism and the dominance of US monopolies. This is at the root of the US pivot to Asia and the New Cold War against China.
- Inter-imperialist rivalries resurface both as competition within the architecture of international treaties and as open

drives to war. Institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund continue to be used to enforce the general interests of the monopolies against what used to be called the developing world, but rivalries within and between imperialist states and blocs are becoming more apparent. This can be seen, for example, in the emerging tensions between the USA and the EU and in the emerging crisis within the EU itself.

### **The theory and practice of British Communists' anti-imperialism**

I have made the above remarks at a general world level at a high level of abstraction. I want now to make some brief remarks about the theory and practice of anti-imperialism in Britain. Throughout the 102 years since the formation of our Party, Britain's Communists have striven to apply the theory of imperialism to the concrete conditions we find in our country and to the particular nature and role of Britain's imperialism, using this to guide our political practice in anti-imperialist struggle.

Our aim, at the most general level, has been to analyse and understand the particular nature of British imperialism and fight to weaken its potency internationally. We have done this by waging a battle of ideas within the British labour movement, to win it away from a reformist attachment to imperialism, and by building greater support for socialist states and national liberation and national sovereignty struggles. We understand that no progress toward socialism in Britain is possible without the most thoroughgoing anti-imperialist struggle.

In the era of colonialism, at the time when Lenin and the Bolsheviks were forging the theory of imperialism and inaugurating the socialist challenge, Britain's Communists were the first to theorise both the basis of Britain's vast empire in the external orientation of British monopoly capitalism and the role that the empire played in buttressing reformist politics in the labour movement. Communists fought a long battle to win the trade unions to understand the nature of Britain's empire and the importance of supporting national liberation struggles. We exposed the brutality of British imperial repression in India, Malaya, Kenya and Ghana. Britain's Communists also worked to develop united theory and political practice and to provide practical support and solidarity to the growing Communist Parties in the British Empire.

Britain's Communists mobilised to stifle the growth of fascism in Britain in the 1930s and hundreds of members volunteered to fight Spanish, German and Italian fascism in Spain, recognising that fascism – the openly terroristic dictatorship of monopoly capital – was and remains the most deadly expression of monopoly class power and its imperialist tendencies. The writings of leading Communist Party theoretician Rajani Palme Dutt were very influential in this area, notably his *Fascism and Social Revolution*.

When British imperialism realigned in the post-war period to assume a dependent and increasingly subordinate alliance with the USA, Britain's Communists exposed the material basis of this alliance in the series of failed attempts by British monopoly capital to preserve its international power. This led the British government into hostile positions in relation to the socialist states and Communist forces, including heavy British military involvement in the Greek Civil War and the US-led war against People's Korea. It also led to increased military spending, support for NATO and the maintenance of nuclear weapons, which have remained a bedrock of British imperialism since.

Communists exposed the atrocities of British forces involved

in these struggles, built organisations to promote understanding of the achievements of socialist states, worked to build broad-based organisations against nuclear weapons and won labour movement support for national liberation struggles. It was a measure of the progress made in large part by the work of British Communists, that opposition to the US war in Vietnam became official labour movement policy, alongside growing support for national liberation struggles across Africa and Asia.

Britain's Communists also applied our understanding of imperialism to the development of the European Union. The nature of this treaty-based organisation as an expression of monopoly's imperialist and anti-democratic tendencies is now far clearer than it was, but the battle to extend this understanding and the associated need to defend and restore popular sovereignty more widely through the British labour movement is a hard one.

Today our battle within the labour movement goes on: building and maintaining solidarity with Cuba; forging new ties with China and building better understanding of its revolution and transitional process; opposing our state's strategic alliance with the USA and its drive to war in Europe and Asia, and working to increase understanding of the global role of NATO; exposing the appalling costs of imperialism across the Middle East and Africa.

### **Some closing remarks looking forward**

We understand that there is no work more important than the struggle against imperialism. Imperialism's drive to war must be halted: both the war on social systems aimed at China and the war that has broken out on the borders of Europe. Barbarism is close at hand.

The first political priority is peace. Every day imperialism creates war that kills hundreds of thousands, displaces millions and destroys and disfigures lives. The escalation of imperialist war is an existential threat to the peoples of the world. Peace is not only necessary, it is an affront and a defeat for imperialism. It is an assertion of the will of people and the interests of the working class against the will and interests of monopoly capital.

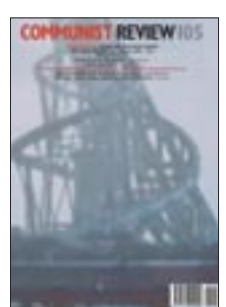
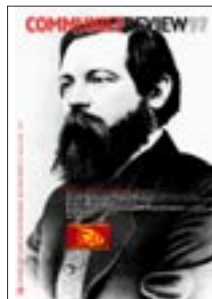
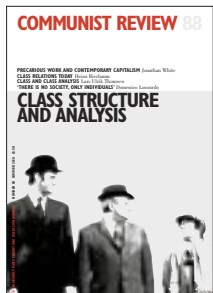
But we must also work to improve and test our theory.

- We must understand better how imperialism works today, to be able to demonstrate more clearly how its new forms function to concentrate wealth globally and drive the world toward unending war.
- We must work to improve understanding of the need for popular sovereignty. In an era not just of semi-colonies but of international treaties and organisations that dictate macro-economic policy, ownership and the entire basis of social systems, the right to self-determination and popular sovereignty are also affronts to monopolies and their imperialist aspirations. They place the direction of the state and its levers within range of class struggles waged by concrete working classes and their allies.
- We must study the lessons of the national liberation struggles in the Middle East and Africa: how they relate to the larger forces at work in the world system of states and how they are determined by the particular conditions at work within each state. Both remain spheres for imperialist manipulation and domination and inter-imperialist rivalry.
- We must also achieve a better theoretical and popular understanding of transitional states; of the balance of forces within them and how they alter the global balance of forces and tendencies.

This is what we aspire to do in the pages of our theoretical journal *Communist Review*, but I look forward to learning from comrades across the world in the course of this conference.

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# JOSÉ MARIA SISON: AN UNFORTUNATE LEGACY

## KEN FULLER

JOSÉ MARIA SISON, founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), died in Utrecht on December 16 at the age of 83. While his supporters have issued the expected eulogies, Sison's legacy can hardly be viewed as positive.

Born in 1939 of a wealthy landed family in the northern province of Ilocos Sur, Sison became politically active as a student leader in 1959. In 1961, he spent several months in Indonesia, where he met members of the Partai Komunis Indonesia and studied Marxist-Leninist classics. In late 1962, he joined the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (now called the PKP-1930 to distinguish it from Sison's CPP) and was soon a member of its newly-formed Executive Committee.

The PKP was at this stage a shadow of its former self. During the Japanese occupation it had led a highly successful guerilla organisation called the *Hukbalahap*. However, with the return of US forces, the party and the armed units it led had found themselves under attack by the government of Manuel Roxas, who attained the presidency of the new republic with the enthusiastic support of General Douglas MacArthur.

Although the *Huks* were fighting a defensive war at first, later in the 1940s the PKP, under the leadership of José Lava, took the misguided decision to switch to the offensive in an attempt to gain state power, believing that a revolutionary situation existed. This led to disaster. In 1950, many of the party's leaders were captured in what became known as the 'Politburo raid'; and thereafter, as the USA poured in resources and 'advisors', thousands of party members and *Huk* members were killed or captured, and by the mid-1950s the '*Huk* Rebellion' was over.

In 1963, the decision was taken to painstakingly rebuild the PKP and its influence by means of a series of mass organisations: for the labour sector, the National Association of Trade Unions, which a little later provided the basis for the formation of the *Lapiang Manggagawa* (LM, or Labour Party); for the peasantry, the *Malayang Samahang Magsasaka* (MASAKA, or Free Union of Peasants); and for the youth sector, *Kabataang Makabayan* (KM, or Patriotic Youth, in which Sison played a leading role). The same period saw the launch of *Progressive Review*, a magazine with broad anti-imperialist appeal, edited by Sison.

Potentially the most far-reaching contribution to the anti-imperialist cause came with the formation of the Movement for the Advancement of Nationalism (MAN) in February 1967. Although it adopted essentially the same anti-imperialist demands as the aforementioned organisations, the difference lay in the breadth of support for MAN. 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, six scientists and technologists, 13 media workers, 17 writers, 7 political leaders and 11 civic leaders.

It therefore looked as if the scene was set for major developments on the anti-imperialist front. But it was not to be, as it was in 1967 that Sison broke from the PKP.

Significantly, Sison had visited China early that year – a time when the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" was under way and Maoists were calling for splits in those communist parties deemed "revisionist". It is true that some of the criticisms which Sison levelled at the PKP – in particular the role of the Lava family, which dominated the organisation – had some validity, but events would show that such problems were capable of resolution within the party; the primary motivation of the split was Sison's adoption of Maoism.

It was over a year later before Sison – now calling himself "Amado Guerrero" (Beloved Warrior) – held his "Re-establishment Congress" attended by a mere 11 people, at which a Maoist program was adopted. Henceforth, the Soviet Union and its allies would be condemned as "revisionist" and "social imperialist", power would come "from the barrel of a gun", and state power would be gained by "encircling the cities from the countryside." The New People's Army (NPA), initially based on *Huk* remnants who had persisted with armed struggle, was formed in March 1969.

The immediate upshot of this development was the hasty departure from MAN of many of the non-proletarian elements who had endorsed its programme; and it is a fact that there has never since been a genuinely broad anti-imperialist organisation in the Philippines – possibly because, in the view of many, anti-imperialism now appeared to be linked to armed struggle. Likewise, *Progressive Review* suffered a lingering demise, and the *Lapiang Manggagawa* was dead.

There were occasional armed clashes between the CPP-NPA and the PKP in these early days, but the relations between the two parties were usually marked by vituperative exchanges which reached their lowest point when Sison launched a scandalous attack on William Pomeroy, the US communist who joined the *Huks* in 1950 and as a result spent almost 10 years in Philippine prisons. In a series of six articles in the CPP journal *Ang Bayan*, which were published in booklet form in 1972, Sison described Pomeroy as a "counter-revolutionary renegade and scab" who "also exercises his role as a special agent of US imperialism." And yet, in the years before the split, Sison had maintained a friendly correspondence with Pomeroy and published one of his articles in *Progressive Review*!

The NPA was designed to be a force which would wage "pro-



tracted people's war." Its early military encounters with government forces were fairly disastrous, but President Ferdinand Marcos used its existence and activity as a pretext for the declaration of martial law in 1972.

There is no doubt that during the martial law years both the CPP and the NPA underwent a period of growth, although estimates of NPA strength, including by the Western press, were usually exaggerated: while the figure of 25,000 was often given, Sison himself would later acknowledge that the number of full-time fighters (those equipped with high-powered rifles) would never exceed 7,000.

Sison was arrested in 1977 and remained in jail until released by the government of Corazon Aquino in 1986. February of that year had seen the 'people power' phenomenon aimed at toppling Marcos – which, with assistance from Washington, it did. The official line of the CPP, mistakenly calculating that the USA would never allow Marcos to fall, was non-involvement, although some members ignored this.

Once freed, Sison immediately embarked on a series of lectures, in the course of which the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries were no longer referred to as "social imperialist". Instead, he said, such countries were "bound by the principle of proletarian internationalism and must allow their revolutionary forces to have the best of fraternal relations with the Philippine revolutionary forces, and extend moral and material support to them."

This, it emerged, was part of a broader diplomatic offensive, a major aim of which was to secure arms. With Mikhail Gorbachev in office in Moscow, of course, such an aim was foolhardy, but it is an illustration of Sison's opportunism. When the Soviet Union collapsed, he reverted to his previous position.

At the time that he announced the change of line in 1986, preparations were under way for peace negotiations between the National Democratic Front (in practice the diplomatic arm of the CPP-NPA) and the Philippine government, but the talks collapsed, as would those with successive governments.

In 1987, while on his "world tour", Sison was in the Netherlands when he learned that his passport had been withdrawn. Although this order was later rescinded, he would remain in Utrecht until his death.

The 1980s saw a number of "mass campaigns" aimed at suspected deep-penetration agents in which up to a thousand members of the CPP-NPA were killed. Sison later criticised these atrocities, blaming them in part on "panic" by those who had opted for a strategy of urban insurrection. However, in 1996, when I interviewed Filemon 'Popoy' Lagman (leader of

the CPP, and later the breakaway, in the Manila-Rizal region), he claimed that "Joma Sison agreed with all these anti-infiltration campaigns."

In the latter 1980s, the CPP's mass organisations somewhat surprisingly began working with those of the PKP and others in a number of broad mass organisations: the Congress for a People's Agrarian Reform was aimed at influencing the agrarian reform legislation then being debated by Congress; the National Movement for Civil Liberties was formed as a response to the rise of vigilante groups and right-wing militarism; the Freedom from Debt Coalition called for the repudiation of debt arising from fraudulent loans and for opposition to IMF and World Bank conditionality; the *Anti-Baseng Koalisyon Demokratiko* (Abakada) campaigned against the US bases; and the Labour Advisory and Consultative Council (LACC), although formed on the initiative of Labour Secretary Augusto Sanchez, facilitated a high degree of unity between the various units of the notoriously fractious trade union movement.

Such unity did not last. In October 1990, during an 'indefinite' strike (which lasted two days) calling for an increase in the minimum wage and a roll-back of oil prices, armed NPA units burned 24 buses, as a result of which support for future mass actions dramatically declined.

Although Sison, now using the pseudonym Armando Liwanag (Armed Light), criticised the October extremist actions, in the CPP's anniversary statement in December ("Lead the Masses, Launch the Offensives") he claimed that there was now a "revolutionary flow", and he called for "gigantic mass actions", such as the surrounding of the presidential palace by 100,000 people. Needless to say, that did not happen.

It was as if the alliances of the previous few years had never occurred. "Suddenly", one former PKP activist told me, "all the gains went up with the ashes of the buses." But the way to united action would be further barred by the purge which Sison now unleashed within the CPP.

In preparation for a CPP congress, Sison was assigned to draft a document summarising the history of the party. This document would both lead to the formalisation of the splits within the party and give him unrivalled leadership over those sections still prepared to toe the Maoist line. *Reaffirm our Principles and Rectify Errors* counselled its readers to "always measure ourselves according to" certain principles, including "class analysis of Philippine society as semi-colonial and semi-feudal" and the "theory of people's war and the strategic line of encircling the cities from the countryside." As such "basic principles" had been ignored, several "major errors and deviations have seriously damaged and now threaten the very life of the Party," such as the "wishful thinking" of urban insurrectionism and regularisation of the NPA. Those guilty of such errors were now expected to undergo "rectification".

This document and its companion, *General Review of Significant Events and Decisions (1980-1991)*, triggered a blizzard of position papers from his critics (known as 'rejectionists' or RJs) within the party and soon led to formal splits, with various regional organisations and sectoral groups breaking away from the CPP to form a bewildering array of parties.

Thereafter, the CPP decreed that there should be no joint activity with groups or parties formed by RJs, and that remains the position today.

With the passing of José Maria Sison, many will be hoping that such sectarianism has died with him.

# FICTITIOUS CAPITAL

## MARTIN GRAHAM



In Volume 3 of Marx's *Capital*, there are numerous, often fleeting, references to "fictitious capital" but Marx offers no comprehensive definition. Taking these references as a whole, "fictitious capital" in Marx is capital applied not to the acquisition of commodities and the production of surplus value but rather to the acquisition of tokens of value. The price of these tokens of value can rise and fall quite independently of any change in value of commodities to which they may be titles. The value of the capital for which "fictitious capital" is exchanged is expressed, as is all capital, in hours of socially necessary labour. Fictitious capital today is, however, invariably expressed in monetary terms and its purpose, to varying degrees, is speculation.<sup>1</sup>

Fictitious capital can take a wide variety of forms. Robert Griffiths<sup>2</sup> has described many of these and draws attention to their growth in recent years, especially following the collapse of the USSR and the dismantling of barriers to the international movement of capital in the process dubbed 'globalisation'. Aside perhaps from the hoarding of money, a key element in all of these forms is that they involve speculation. The global market for largely speculative financial derivatives alone is now of the order of \$13 tn.<sup>3</sup> Other examples of speculative investment include interest rate swaps, credit default swaps, synthetic collateralised debt obligations, cryptocurrencies and even, regrettably for art lovers, investment in fine art. Much

investment in banks is, as Marx recognised, fictitious capital.

Some forms of fictitious capital can, nevertheless, expect to secure a share of surplus value. For example, capital invested in commercial banks may secure a share of the surplus value created by the businesses the commercial banks support with banking and financial services. Many other forms of fictitious capital appear, however, to have little or no prospect of securing a share of surplus value, at least not in 'normal' times.<sup>4</sup> When, for example, fictitious capital is used for trading in financial security and other markets, it participates in a zero-sum game in which the profit of one party to every trade is offset by the loss incurred by the other party. Neither investor hubris, nor the prospect of government support for financial institutions deemed 'too big to fail' following a financial crash, would appear to provide a sufficient explanation for the huge scale of fictitious capital we observe.

The purpose of this paper is to propose an alternative explanation based on a Marxist understanding of capital and finance.

According to Marx's Labour Theory of Value, money capital,  $M$ , expressed in units of currency, is exchanged for variable and constant capital  $C$ , comprising the commodities of Labour Power  $L$  and the Means of Production  $MP$  (plant, equipment etc) respectively. This labour process results in the creation of new capital  $C'$ , in the form of commodities and

incorporating surplus value  $S$ , so that sale of these commodities realises increased money capital,  $M'$ . This process is described in brief as  $M-C-C'-M'$  and covers the entire period until  $C'$  is realised. We can, however, impose an arbitrary time frame of one year on this process by assuming that  $C'$  is notionally realised at the end of a year. Furthermore, I allow for money capital accumulated at the end of the year,  $M'$ , not necessarily being equal to the amount needed to re-acquire the entire capital accumulated at the end of the year,  $C'$ . Thus the process can be represented for an entire economy as  $M_0-C_0-C_1-(M_1+\Delta FC)$ , where the diversion of capital into fictitious capital,  $\Delta FC$ , is expressed in units of currency. The principle here is that, in effect, money capital must find an outlet and, if investment in commodity production is insufficient, it will flow into fictitious capital. It simply has *nowhere else to go*.

In order to understand money capital, it is necessary first to appreciate that it is only part of the total money supply,  $MT$ , and then to define what we mean by 'money'.

The functional definition of money, repeated by Geoffrey Ingham<sup>5</sup>, is that money is what money does and this is to perform all four of the following functions:

- a numerical measure of value;
- a means of payment;
- a medium of exchange;
- a store of value.

To perform these functions, money must be *fungible*. This means that it can be substituted, in part or in whole, by an equivalent amount of the same thing. For example, a £50 bank deposit can be exchanged for five £10 notes. Not everything, even in finance, is fungible. For example, a debt of £50 from person A is not fungible – it cannot be exchanged for five £10 debts from persons B, C, D, E and F, when we know nothing about the creditworthiness of these individuals.

While confirming the importance of fungibility, Ingham is somewhat dismissive of this functional definition of money and goes on to describe the continuing debate on the nature of money, characterising it as a contention between “materialism and naturalism” and “nominalism and social constructionism”. In Ingham’s view we are encouraged not to question who creates money, for what ends and in what quantities, and to consider only technical matters to be decided by “experts”. He cites one such “expert”, the former Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, as asserting that “The role of a central bank is extremely simple: to ensure that the right amount of money is created in both good times and bad times.”<sup>6</sup> For this Lord King would rely on such technical monetary definitions as  $M1$ ,  $M2$  and  $M3$ .

Without engaging fully in this debate or examining these technical definitions, the analysis which follows treats money and bank deposits as synonymous and ignores notes and coin in circulation as immaterial. Similarly, we ignore cryptocurrencies as these have yet to make any significant contribution as a means of payment or even as a reliable store of value. Money, for the purposes of this article, comprises bank deposits essentially created *ex nihilo* by commercial banks in the course of their routine banking activities, albeit under the watchful eye of the central bank, which stands ready to intervene to ensure King’s “right amount of money” is created and circulating. This process is well understood by central banks and widely acknowledged,<sup>7</sup> despite occasional complaints that it defies ‘common sense’.<sup>8</sup> The creation by banks of money *ex nihilo* arises because every deposit in a commercial bank in ‘normal’ times is re-lent by that bank and re-deposited by the borrower

in another bank, with only a small proportion retained by the original bank as a reserve. The process is then repeated. While bank deposits perform the four functions of money identified by Ingham, the debts created by banks and included on their balance sheets do not. They are not ‘negative money’<sup>9</sup>, but simply non-negotiable assets owned by the bank. Furthermore, as money is fungible, the number of units of currency circulating increases *pari passu*<sup>10</sup> rather than being something that benefits an individual bank. Commercial banks’ profits arise from the difference between the rates they charge borrowers and the rates they pay depositors, not directly from creating money.

The process by which banks create money *ex nihilo* can be described algebraically by considering the idealised case of a world with lots of banks without any deposits. One person has a £1 coin which she deposits in Bank 1. The bank retains a proportion  $R$  of this deposit and advances what is left,  $\pounds(1-R)$ . Bank 2 receives  $\pounds(1-R)$ , retains the same proportion  $R$ , in money terms  $\pounds R(1-R)$ , and advances what is left,  $\pounds((1-R) - R(1-R)) = \pounds(1-R)^2$ . Bank 3 receives this and advances  $\pounds(1-R)^3$ , and so on. Bank advances therefore accumulate to the standard algebraic result:

$$\pounds \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} (1-R)^n = \pounds \frac{1}{R} .$$

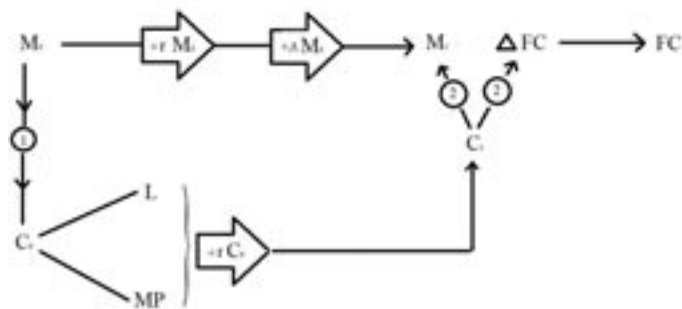
This idealised case explains why only some 4% of money currently in circulation is in the form of notes and coin and 96% is money in the form of bank deposits, underpinned by only a fraction,  $R$ , of banks’ assets.

Central banks carefully monitor the creation of money by commercial banks to ensure that they supply, in Lord King’s words, “the right amount of money”. The central bank will adjust the bank rate of interest accordingly and engage in so-called ‘open market transactions’ to encourage, or discourage, commercial banks to lend; and, when this fails, it may resort to creating money by undertaking ‘quantitative easing’, in which it buys government securities and retains them on its balance sheet. At times of financial crisis the government itself may bail out and even nationalise banks, avoiding contagious financial collapse and the resulting destruction of money, albeit returning control to the shareholders after the crisis has passed. These are all 21st century alternatives to governments resorting to the printing press to create money. Central banks employ them, guided by monetary statistics, to seek to control inflation and bring it in line with government targets and to influence the overall level of activity in the economy.

While money is expressed in units of currency, the quantity of which depends on bank activity and central bank interventions, capital is expressed in hours of socially necessary labour and increases only as a result of employing labour to create Surplus Value,  $S$ . I employ throughout this article the Temporal Single System Interpretation (TSSI) of Marx’s Labour Theory of Value.<sup>11</sup> TSSI holds that, while the price of an individual commodity does not necessarily equate to its value expressed in socially necessary labour time, at the aggregate level of an entire economy value and price are essentially different expressions of the same thing and may be expressed in either unit. Thus  $C_0$ ,  $C_1$  and  $S$  are expressed in hours of socially necessary labour time;  $M_1$ ,  $M_2$ ,  $\Delta FC$  and  $FC$  are expressed in units of currency, with the Monetary Expression of Labour Time,  $MELT$ , the conversion factor. The Temporal component in TSSI rejects attempts by Bortkiewicz and others to apply simultane-

ous equations to Marx’s Labour Theory of Value. These attempts, often referred to as the Simultaneous Interpretation of Marx’s Labour Theory of Value, led to claims that Marx’s Labour Theory of Value was internally inconsistent and subject to a number of anomalies including the so called ‘Transformation Problem’, and to a denial of the Tendency for the Rate of Profit to Fall. These anomalies do not arise when TSSI is adopted.

One important implication of TSSI is that, as Alan Freeman has described,<sup>12</sup> economies are seldom in the state of equilibrium assumed in neoclassical economics. This has implication for the relationship I derive below by means of which central banks could seek to influence the rate of inflation and the growth in fictitious capital.



▲ Fig 1. Notional circulation of capital for an entire economy. For definition of symbols, see text.  $C_0$ ,  $L$ ,  $MP$  and  $C_1$  are expressed in hours of socially necessary labour-time, while  $M_0$ ,  $M_1$ ,  $FC$  and  $\Delta FC$  are in currency. ① and ② represent, respectively, capital acquisition at the start of the year, and its realisation at the end of the year, both in terms of MELT.

Fig 1 describes an entire economy and derives from illustrations in the 2022 discussion paper by the Communist Party’s Political Economy Commission, *Banks and Banking*,<sup>13</sup> except that a single, composite diagram is employed, allowance is made for money capital to increase in line with the rate of return on capital<sup>14</sup> and more precision has been used in specifying exactly when acquisitions, realisations and notional exchanges take place. These exchanges are assumed to be at the Monetary Expression of Labour Time, with that at the start of the year identified as  $MELT_0$ , and at the end of the year as  $MELT_1$ .

It should be borne in mind that both neoclassical economics and conventional accountancy employ a different terminology to Marxist analysis. They refer to ‘capital employed’, ie the stock of capital, whereas  $C_0$  and  $C_1$  in Fig 1 are capital flows and are exchanged, actually or notionally, for money at specific points in the cycle. Similarly,  $MP$  is the consumption of the means of production in the year, including the annual economic depreciation<sup>15</sup> of plant and equipment, not the stock of plant and equipment at the start or end of the year.

Fictitious capital is shown in Fig 1 as a diversion of capital,  $\Delta FC$ , from commodity production into speculative investment. It is expressed units of currency. As fictitious capital can, according to Marx’s Labour Theory of Value, have no other source than this diversion, it follows that

$$FC = \sum_{(1)} \Delta FC - \alpha \tag{1}$$

where  $\alpha$  is the destruction of fictitious capital that will occur in some future financial crisis, ie not within the annual cycle under consideration.

According to TSSI,

$$C_0 + S = C_1 \tag{2}$$

Furthermore,

$$r = \frac{S}{C_0} \tag{3}$$

where  $r$  is the value rate of profit. Marx held that there is no difference between the value rate of profit and the Marxian or price rate of profit (profit/ $M_0$ ) for an entire economy. This flows logically from his Labour Theory of Value which holds that only commodity production creates value. In this article we refer to both rates of profit as  $r$ .

It should be noted that the Marxian rate of profit differs in a number of ways from the rate of profit employed in neoclassical economics and financial accounting.<sup>16</sup>  $r$  is a real rate of return, ie it is independent of any change in the number of units of currency created in the year. Substituting in equation 3,

$$C_0(1+r) = C_1 \tag{4}$$

I assume that changes in MELT depend only on the rate of increase in labour productivity  $\rho$  and the rate of increase of wage rates in commodity production, :

$$MELT_1 = MELT_0(1+\rho)(1+i_w) \tag{5}$$

In *Banks and Banking* the general rate of inflation was (incorrectly) employed. By definition,

$$C_0MELT_0 = M_0 \tag{6}$$

and

$$C_1MELT_1 = M_1 + \Delta FC \tag{7}$$

Equation 7 reflects the principle that capital must find an outlet and, if investment in commodity production is unavailable, it will flow into fictitious capital. As Figure 1 depicts an economy in aggregate, the argument that individual banks have agency at the end of the year and can choose to direct funds into capital or fictitious capital as they wish, is rejected.

From equations 4, 5, 6 and 7, the circulation of capital can be expressed as

$$M_0 = \frac{M_1 + \Delta FC}{(1+\rho)(1+i_w)(1+r)} \tag{8}$$

As depicted in Fig 1, the circulation of money capital, on the other hand, conforms to

$$M_0(1+r)(1+A) = M_1 \tag{9}$$

where  $A$  is the rate of growth in the money supply. Note this is the rate of growth of all money but applies equally to that part comprising money capital.<sup>17</sup> Equation 9 depends on the following argument.  $M_0$  is the sum of money capital expressed in £ at the start of the year; it earns a real rate of return  $r$  and is subject to the creation of money at rate  $A$ . If no money is created, then  $M_0(1+r) = M_1$ : this is the definition of  $r$ . Now, if the rate of profit is zero, but money is created, then  $M_0(1+A) = M_1$ , which is the definition of  $A$  provided money is fungible.

With non-zero  $r$  and  $A$ , equation 9 follows.

Equations 8 and 9 can be combined to eliminate  $M_0$  and arrive at

$$\frac{\Delta FC}{(M_1 + \Delta FC)} = 1 - \frac{(1 + A)}{(1 + \rho)(1 + i_w)} \quad (10)$$

where  $\frac{\Delta FC}{(M_1 + \Delta FC)}$  is the proportion of capital diverted into fictitious capital. When the rate of increase in labour productivity  $\rho$  and the rate of increase of wage rates in commodity production  $i_w$  are small, a good approximation for Equation 10 is

$$\frac{\Delta FC}{(M_1 + \Delta FC)} \approx \rho + i_w - A \quad (10a)$$

Equations 10 and 10A indicate that fictitious capital will increase whenever the rate of increase in money supply,  $A$ , fails to exceed the combined rates of increase in labour productivity and wage rates in the commodity producing sector. Money capital must find an outlet and, if investment in commodity production, given existing rates of increase in labour productivity and productive labour wage rates, is insufficient to absorb it all, the balance will be diverted into speculation. Essentially, as stated above, it has *nowhere else to go*. This conclusion contrasts with the view taken in marginalist, neoclassical economics and its neoliberal extension, where the growth in speculative investment is seen as a response to marginally better returns arising from the supposed ‘investment skills’ of speculators and professional investment managers.<sup>18</sup>

Equations 10 and 10A can help explain the huge scale of fictitious capital we currently observe. Not only is the diversion into fictitious capital revealed as a natural tendency under capitalism, it is encouraged by the tendency of central banks to seek to control the money supply in line with the general rate of inflation which will be correlated with  $i_w$ . Thus, if  $A = i_w$ , fictitious capital will grow in line with the growth in labour productivity, and this growth will continue unchecked until the stock of fictitious capital has accumulated to such a level that it becomes unsustainable and another financial crisis ensues. Thus fictitious capital contributes, along with the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall, to the prevalence of recurring financial crises under capitalism.

Why do capitalists allow fictitious capital to grow to the point where collapse is inevitable? One might as well ask why they allow financial crises to occur. Banking crises, which are often a trigger for wider financial crises, appear to arise every 15 years or so,<sup>19</sup> but not with predictable timing. Many investors, even supposedly ‘expert’ institutional ones, are attracted by the huge profits to be earned from speculative investment, believing that their supposed acumen, expertise and understanding of markets will enable them to escape the inevitable collapse and the losses others will incur. Large institutional investors are doubtless reassured by the prospect of a government rescue of those deemed ‘too big to fail’, a rescue that will be financed by a subsequent imposition of ‘austerity’ on workers.

If much of the blame for allowing fictitious capital to grow until it collapses under its own weight can be laid at the feet of central banks and their political masters, the real culprit is cap-

italism itself. For as long as capitalism persists, resources will continue to be diverted from meeting human needs into speculation and accumulation by the few. The preceding analysis is intended to throw some light on one aspect of this. The fundamental solution called for is, however, not reform of central banks and how they regulate the banking system, but rather a socialist Britain and eventually the world in which the means of production, distribution and exchange are socially owned and utilised in a planned way for the benefit of all, including future generations.

## Notes and References

- 1 This is true even when fictitious capital takes the form of a money hoard. The hoarder is speculating that the loss of interest will be compensated by a reduction in the threat of appropriation or improved purchasing power at some future date.
- 2 R Griffiths, *Marx's Das Kapital and Capitalism Today*, Manifesto Press, 2nd edn, 2018.
- 3 See [https://www.bis.org/publ/otc\\_hy2111.htm](https://www.bis.org/publ/otc_hy2111.htm).
- 4 At times of financial crisis, such as in the Great Financial Crisis of 2007-8, governments will, however, step in to ensure that fictitious capital is protected, effectively gifting it a share of surplus value.
- 5 G Ingham, *Money*, Polity Press, 2020.
- 6 <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/mervyn-king-says-this-is-the-future-of-central-banks-2016-09-26>.
- 7 A clear explanation can, for example, be found in J Lanchester, *Whoops!*, Penguin, 2010.
- 8 The ‘common sense’ but mistaken view is that banks merely lend what they borrow. See the exchange of letters (including one by the author) in the *Morning Star* around the New Year 2023.
- 9 A case can be made that a bank overdraft is a form of negative money, but as most bank advances take the form of loans rather than overdrafts, I abstract from this aspect of bank advances.
- 10 The quantity of commodities for which the money can be exchanged remains, of course, at least in the short term, unaltered. Creating money does not create value.
- 11 For a good introduction, see A Kliman, *Reclaiming Marx's Capital – a refutation of the myth of inconsistency*, Lexington Books, 2007.
- 12 A Freeman, *The Psychopathology of Walrasian Marxism*, and *Price, Value and Profit – a continuous, general treatment*, Chs 1 and 13 of *Marx and Non-Equilibrium Economics*, A Freeman and G Carchedi, eds, Edward Elgar, 1996.
- 13 *Banks and Banking – curtailing bank privileges and ensuring that society's needs for banking are better met*, CPB, 2nd edn, January 2022. Note that there are errors in the 1st edn, which has now been withdrawn.
- 14 In this article, as in *Banks and Banking*, I abstract from dividend payments and other distributions, assuming that these all occur at the end of the year and are reflected in the final realisation of capital.
- 15 Sometimes referred to in the literature as ‘moral depreciation’.
- 16 In particular the denominator includes variable capital, *ie* wages and the depreciation charge, with the latter reflecting capital consumption, not arbitrary, ‘straight-line’ or replacement cost depreciation employed in financial accounts.
- 17 I define  $A$  as  $M_{T1}/M_{T0} - 1$ , where  $M_{T0}$  and  $M_{T1}$  are the total supply of money in units of currency (£) at the beginning and end of the year. Thus  $M_{T0}(1+A) = M_{T1}$ . Money capital, on the other hand, conforms to Equation 9 as, by definition,  $1+r = M_1/M_0(1+A)$ . As money is fungible, it follows that money other than money capital ( $M_{T0} - M_0$ ) must decrease by the amount that money capital increases in the year.
- 18 This is consistent with the Efficient Capital Market Hypothesis (ECMH) under which it is impossible for even the most skilled investor to consistently ‘beat the market’ by outperforming a widely diversified portfolio. To the embarrassment of the financial services ‘industry’, there is much empirical evidence supporting the ECMH.
- 19 See Fig 2 of *Banks and Banking*, which Professor John Kay kindly allowed to be reproduced in that report.



# XI JINPING AND CHINA'S 21ST CENTURY NEO-MAOISTS

SEAN MELEADY



THERE IS NO doubt that the Communist Party of China (CPC) is the biggest and one of the most successful political parties in the world, most obviously exemplified by lifting 800 million people out of poverty, the initial success of its dynamic Zero Covid policy<sup>1,2</sup> and its role in tackling climate change<sup>3</sup>.

Although most Chinese seem happy with CPC rule, there is a critical minority who claim that the CPC has moved too far away from the policies of the founder of the People's Republic, Mao Zedong. These are the neo-Maoists<sup>4,5</sup> who are increasingly going online pushing their pro-Mao, nationalist, leftist sentiment.

In the first section of this article, I will address the claims, particularly from the West, that Xi is a neo-Maoist himself. This will include an analysis of his experiences during the Cultural Revolution and how they shaped his political outlook. I will also discuss how Xi arguably pays homage to Mao without encouraging the anti-elitist political mobilisation of the Maoist era.

Secondly, I will explain the legacy of Mao for the CPC itself. This will include a discussion of the Gang of Four, and the 1981 verdict of the legacy of Mao as well as his resurgence as a figure of opposition after the 1989 student protests. There will also be a discussion of how the CPC feels duty bound to celebrate Mao without celebrating Maoist politics.

I shall also discuss the neo-Maoists themselves. Their nationalist leftist campaigns against "historical nihilism" and economic liberalism online are linked to Red Culture and the Maoist 'red model' set up by Bo Xilai in Chongqing. In addition, how does Xi, who appears on the surface at least more sympathetic to the neo-Maoists, fit into this?

### Maoism and neo-Maoism

Maoism, officially referred to as Mao Zedong Thought, is a variation of Marxist-Leninism developed to realise a socialist revolution in the agricultural pre-industrial society of the Republic of China and following the 1949 revolution.<sup>6</sup> There is also a fundamental difference from traditional Marxism in that it is the peasantry that is seen as the vanguard class rather than the industrial urban proletariat.<sup>7</sup> Marx argued that a proletarian revolution was inevitable due to the conflict between the productive forces of the workers and the capitalists who owned the means of production. In contrast Mao wanted to unite the Chinese nation and seek progressive change, therefore a revolution was needed as soon as possible.<sup>8</sup>

Rongbin Hanix argues that the neo-Maoist movement combines popular Chinese nationalism with nostalgia for Mao Zedong-style communism. It is a Janus movement, simultaneously defending the CPC against its critics while also challenging the Party in relation to domestic issues, particularly corruption and inequality. A semi-underground movement, it arguably represents those left behind by China's economic reforms, who identify as neo-Maoists as they believe that the Maoist era from 1949 to 1976 was more egalitarian.<sup>10</sup> They also favour a more traditional centrally-planned economy.<sup>11</sup> Li Yuan<sup>12</sup> has argued that the neo-Maoist movement is driven by the rage against inequality and long working hours from the Chinese equivalent of Generation Z born since the 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

### Xi Jinping

According to many Western writers Xi Jinping is the new Mao who has reintroduced aspects of Maoist political culture. As Julia Lovell, professor of Modern Chinese History and Literature at Birkbeck has argued, this has supposedly included the reintroduction of self-criticism sessions and 'mass line' campaigns to win public support.<sup>14</sup>

In 2018 Xi and the National People's Congress abolished the

1982 constitutional restriction which meant that Chinese leaders could only serve two terms. Theoretically at least, with the support of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi like Mao could lead China for decades.<sup>14,15</sup>

In 2016 a massive gold statue of Mao was built in the Henan countryside.<sup>14</sup> Along with the neo-Maoism of Bo Xilai, Party leader in Chongqing before his downfall, and websites like Utopia<sup>16</sup>, there are on face of it at least signs of a new form of Maoism in Xi's China.<sup>17</sup>

However, in many ways this argument is problematic. Xi's China is radically different from Mao's in many ways. It is tied to the global economy in a way that it wasn't under the 'Great Helmsman' when the People's Republic was largely isolated from the Western world.<sup>1</sup>

Under Mao, the legitimacy of the CPC was based upon a revolutionary ethic, though this was underpinned by significant material achievements, such as the doubling of life expectancy and the dramatic cuts to infant mortality. Under Xi, China's positive economic performance, including substantial poverty reduction, economic growth during the pandemic and the construction of high-speed rail, contribute importantly to the legitimacy of his government. At the same time Xi has managed to maintain the socialist patriotism reminiscent of the Mao era.

Chinese society and the media are now far too diverse for a single political narrative to permeate through society.<sup>14</sup> Chinese citizens are, largely because of the success of the Communist Party, better educated, ambitious and more well-travelled, particularly in urban areas, making the development of a singular collective narrative more difficult.

Chinese neo-Maoists, although not as vociferous in their criticism as under Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, don't see Xi's political project as a revival of full neo-Maoism. Crucially, for them, he has not embraced the anti-authoritarian spirit of the Cultural Revolution.

However, there could be a more personal reason why Xi has arguably only partially embraced neo-Maoism, linked to his own past and family history.<sup>18</sup> Xi was born in Beijing in 1953, the second son of Xi Zhongxun<sup>14</sup> and his wife Qi Xin, who is now in her mid-90s. Xi Zhongxun served the Party directly in the early Mao era as a propaganda chief, vice-premier and vice-chairperson of the National People's Congress. However, when Xi Jinping was 10 years old his father was purged from the CPC and sent to work in a factory in Luoyan, Henan.

Three years later the Cultural Revolution cut short Xi's secondary education, as schools were closed to enable students to criticise and fight their teachers. Student militants ransacked the family home, and one of Xi's sisters, Xi Heping, committed suicide. Qi Xin was forced to publicly denounce her husband, and in 1968 Xi Zhongxun was imprisoned. Xi Jinping spent seven years in a rural area, living some of the time in a cave as part of Mao's campaign to encourage city youth to work in the countryside.<sup>19</sup>

This experience of going from privilege to nothing appears to have affected Xi and his political outlook greatly. It could also be one of the reasons that he is more hesitant in encouraging a more overt form of neo-Maoist political mobilisation.

Nevertheless, Xi is no Gorbachev<sup>20,21</sup>-style pro-Western pluralist. Although he may balk at certain aspects of Mao's legacy, he is emphatic that the primary role of the Communist Party should continue in Chinese society.<sup>22</sup> This was something that he reinforced at the 18th Party Congress in 2012, where he was confirmed as Hu Jintao's successor. When discussing the collapse of the USSR he talked about the "historical nihilism", and the "repu-

diation” of the Soviet Communist Party, Lenin and Stalin, under glasnost and perestroika.<sup>23</sup>

Xi has also emphasised that the analysis of Marx and Engels is not outdated.<sup>24</sup> Xi Jinping Thought, as his political position has become known, has been condensed into a 14-point basis policy. This reinforces the Party’s commitment to its leadership over the country, “socialist core values” linked to Marxist-Leninism, CPC leadership over the military, environmentalism, and “socialism with Chinese characteristics”.<sup>25</sup> Part of this is the idea that China is in the primary stage of socialism and due to its low level of material wealth needs to engage in more economic growth through a socialist market economy before greater egalitarianism and the type of communist society described by Marx and Engels can be established.<sup>26</sup> Socialist institutions are preserved but investment and a degree of competition is encouraged.<sup>27</sup>

Xi has also seen anti-corruption as a key force in preventing the resurgence of a liberal protest movement,<sup>28</sup> like the one that occurred during the 1970s and 80s, which could lead to a Soviet-style collapse. In some ways it is a Maoist-type populist message. However, there is a key difference: while Mao was an outsider who became an insider, Xi was an insider who became an outsider only to become an insider again.

### Mao’s legacy

The legacy of Mao and Maoism has been ambiguous for the CPC since the death of the Great Helmsman in September 1976. Less than a month after that, his wife Jiang Qing and three of her allies were arrested. They became known as the ‘Gang of Four’.

In 1981 the post-Mao leadership produced a document that gave the verdict of the CPC leadership on Mao. Entitled ‘Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Foundation of the People’s Republic’, it was critical of much of Mao’s rule. For example, the 1959-61 famine was described as causing “serious losses” while the Cultural Revolution was described as an error of judgement by a “great proletarian revolutionary”. Crimes were attributed to the Gang of Four and it was concluded that Mao had been 70% right and 30% wrong.

The ninetieth anniversary of Mao’s birth was also celebrated in 1983 with books, films, and postage stamps. However, the student protests in spring 1989, which ultimately led to what is known in China as the June 4 incident, literally took place under the eye of Mao or at least his portrait in Tiananmen Square. It was the end of the liberal 80s in China. After the defeat of the student movement, 870,000 copies of Mao’s portrait were printed, a figure that rose to 50 million in 1991.<sup>29</sup>

In the eyes of his critics, Deng was simply defending the CPC rather than any ideological project. Deng argued that the survival of the CPC depended on the spread of material prosperity.<sup>30</sup> For him productive forces<sup>31</sup> were vital as it wasn’t possible to develop socialism through poverty, and a limited form of capitalism<sup>32</sup> could be used to help develop China and push it further along to the path to socialism.<sup>33</sup>

However, for workers affected by economic liberalisation, there was nostalgia for a more egalitarian age under Mao.<sup>34</sup> Many were hit by closure of the supposedly unprofitable state enterprises in 1998. In 2002 thousands of retired, laid-off or underpaid steel workers in Liaoyang, once the heart of the Maoist economic model, protested.<sup>35</sup>

### Neo-Maoists

The Liaoyang marches and the actions of Deng Xiaoping’s successor Jiang Zemin<sup>36</sup> gave birth to a new era of neo-Maoism. Jiang allowed businesspeople to join the CPC and shut down

Maoist print journals. This intensified anger among leftists about their marginalisation. However, at the same time, at the start of the millennium, internet access was becoming commonplace across China. Maoism went online.<sup>37</sup>

Neo-Maoists rallied around an organisation known as Utopia.<sup>38</sup> It had started as a website in 2003,<sup>39</sup> attached to a bookshop near Beijing University. It drew in students, academics, leftists, artists, writers and cultural critics based at the university. It sold leftist texts difficult to find elsewhere.

Utopia was also influential in mobilising public opinion on certain issues. For example, in 2005 it launched a petition supporting a migrant worker from north-west China who had killed his employers after they refused to pay his wages. In 2007 it denounced the Ang Lee film *Lust, Caution*, about Japanese-occupied Shanghai, as a “Chinese traitor movie” and an “insult to the Chinese people”.

Online neo-Maoists call themselves *Mao Zedong Zuopai* [Mao Zedong leftists].<sup>40</sup> They argue that they represent the most disadvantaged section of Chinese society, which is mostly pro-Mao. They decry the post-Mao market reforms, which they argue are “evil” and forced on the country by “revisionists and capitalists”. They also argue that all the issues in contemporary Chinese society, such as income inequality, corruption and environmental degradation, bear out the wisdom of Mao and the need for continuous revolution to purify the Communist Party by inciting struggle against it.<sup>41</sup>

All of this is within the paradigm of ‘socialist’ and ‘patriotic’ rhetoric which usually means nationalistic, with Mao idealised as an uncompromising leader on international issues. Neo-Maoists invariably blame American interference for flashpoints on China’s frontiers such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea. Some have discussed whether China should support Middle Eastern resistance while others have admired North Korea.

Even though many neo-Maoists are university graduates themselves, intellectuals are viewed with suspicion; knowledge workers have been labelled as the “running dogs of imperialism”.<sup>42</sup> Economically, neo-Maoists support a return to collective, commune farming while opposing state-owned enterprises, privatisation, and globalisation, all of which they have argued had allowed foreigners to take wealth out of the country.

Neo-Maoists are also completely unrepentant about the historical controversies of Mao’s era. They defended the 1957 Anti-Rightist campaign as “far more humane than Stalin’s purges” while denying that millions had died during the Great Leap Forward.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the persecution of ‘class enemies’ during the Cultural Revolution is deemed to have been necessary.

Utopia also leapt to action when liberal economist, Harvard Scholar and Queensland University lecturer Mao Yushi wrote an open criticism of Mao Zedong,<sup>43,44</sup> accusing him of being responsible for 30m deaths through starvation.<sup>45</sup> Neo-Maoist websites organised a petition with 100,000 signatures demanding that the government arrest Mao Yushi for “slandering Mao Zedong and attempting to overthrow the Communist Party.”<sup>46</sup> Groups of neo-Maoists camped outside Mao Yushi’s home holding banners and chanting slogans.

Bo Xilai<sup>46</sup> was Party secretary in Chongqing from 2007 and 2012 and minister of commerce from 2004 to 2007.<sup>47</sup> He not only organised a campaign against organised crime in Chongqing, and increased spending on welfare, but also promoted egalitarian values by diverting money confiscated from rich businessmen into raising salaries and building social housing. This became known as the ‘Chongqing model’, a form of municipal neo-Maoism.<sup>48</sup>

Bo also instituted a ‘red culture’ movement in order to

improve public morale. This included the promotion of Maoist quotes, red songs,<sup>49</sup> revolutionary television programming and operas as well as initiatives to encourage students to work in the countryside, very much like Mao's 'Down to the Countryside' campaign.<sup>50</sup>

Chinese cities relied on internal migrant labour from the countryside, with Chongqing being no exception. Such workers were often regarded as temporary, rather than permanent, residents, with restricted access to healthcare, education, and public goods. In 2008 Bo allowed rural residents to settle in the city and to be counted as city residents.<sup>51</sup>

Before the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 2009, Bo also sent out 'red text messages', with quotes from Mao, to Chongqing's 13m mobile phone users. He also spent \$15.8 bn on public apartment complexes for recent university graduates. At the same time, he increased taxes on property owners but lowered what became known as 'red GDP', with civic egalitarianism and foreign investment from Ford, Hewlett-Packard and others.

In 2008 GDP across China grew by 8% but in Chongqing by 14.3%. In 2008 Bo even held roundtable discussions with striking taxi drivers and agreed to help them form a trade union. Utopia of course became a virtual megaphone for Bo and the Chongqing model.

The events of 2012 are still not properly understood but Bo's wife, a lawyer called Gu Kailai, was convicted of murdering British businessman Neil Heywood.<sup>46</sup> Bo was convicted as an accomplice<sup>52</sup> and is still incarcerated. Naturally the neo-Maoists were furious,<sup>53</sup> but Bo had created a space for the public celebration of Maoist values.

Under Xi Jinping the neo-Maoists have gradually become more contented and less vocal than in the past. Even if they see Xi's veneration of Maoism as partial, there is no doubt that he and the CPC leadership see it as an updated version of Mao Zedong Thought for the 21st century<sup>54</sup>. Therefore, many neo-Maoists value his patriotic calls for national rejuvenation.<sup>55</sup> At the same time there is relative tolerance of the neo-Maoists as long as their calls for revolutionary violence are turned externally and the calls for mass democracy are not acted on in a way that promotes 'instability' rather than a 'harmonious society'.

The Xi era has arguably led to an attempt to fuse the pre- and post-reform period (*ie* the Mao and Deng years).<sup>56</sup> It is a vision that most neo-Maoists have bought into, with some arguing that, although Xi is no Mao, he is building on the freedom from colonialism Mao gave China by giving it a greater say on the world stage.<sup>57</sup>

Jude Blanchette, Chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), reported former Utopia member Zhang Hongliang saying that Xi would bring "order out of chaos" and deliver a "victory for China's left wing".<sup>58</sup> However, Zhang was more critical of Xi's unwillingness to embrace the legacy of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>59</sup> If Xi failed to do this, he argued, then China would never fulfil its political potential.

There was also the issue of historical nihilism. As long as the Cultural Revolution remained enshrined in the 1981 history resolution as a "catastrophe", it could be used against the Party by its enemies. However, Zhang wasn't arguing for a revolution against the CPC, but rather hoping that Xi would lead one himself since "it is only through him that China can rejuvenate."<sup>60</sup>

Another neo-Maoist, Hu Muying, was pleased with Xi's leadership, declaring "The breeze is blowing away the evil air."<sup>60</sup> Nationalist writer Wang Xiading declared "We won", adding "Maybe I didn't win personally, but our ideas won."<sup>56</sup> According

to Wang, Xi had moved China in a different direction, away from reliance on the markets to the state sector with the CPC embracing the idea of 'national champion' firms serving China Inc.

However, this didn't mean that everything was rosy between Xi and the neo-Maoists. The late dissident Chen Zeming had argued that the neo-Maoist movement was comprised of two groups, "Royalists" and "Rebels".<sup>61</sup> His taxonomy could be dated back to the Cultural Revolution, and he saw "Royalists" as the children of high-ranking Party cadres who have an interest in maintaining the *status quo* in terms of the current Party power structure. In contrast the "Rebels" sought to tear down the existing structure in true Maoist fashion. Chen argued that some neo-Maoists, such as Zhang Hongliang, were fundamentally conservative or "Royalist", interested in defending the current regime from outside attacks and trying to ensure it went in a more Maoist or at least left-wing direction. The "Rebels" on the other hand thought that the CPC was so corrupt that it couldn't be saved from within. According to Chen this faction would never be tamed.<sup>62</sup>

It was an accurate and prescient warning, as in 2015 online neo-Maoists from across China met in Luoyang in Henan province, a city that was part of the Mao-era industrial base and where nostalgia for the Mao era was strong. They held an inaugural meeting of the Chinese Maoist Alliance, entitled "Chinese Maoist Communists have united."<sup>62</sup>

There was a mixed reaction from cyber-neo-Maoists<sup>63</sup>, with some support on social media but silence from established neo-Maoist websites such as the Red Song Society and Utopia. On Zhang Hongliang's website, National Rejuvenation, contributors argued that the meeting was the work of "black hawks" trying to split the neo-Maoists from the CPC and to attack Xi Jinping's leadership.

In a symbolic show of support for Xi the establishment neo-Maoists held their own event. Li Dingkai, the co-founder of the Maoflag website<sup>64,65</sup> attended, as did Utopia's general manager Fan Jinggang, who argued that there was much for neo-Maoists to be happy about.<sup>66</sup>

Xiao Gongqin<sup>67</sup> observed in 2012 that the neo-Maoist movement is comprised of veteran cadres along with younger ones, often students who have studied abroad. He argued that the economic growth in China had also produced "disappointment and dissatisfaction" with Chinese society as well as a "romantic nostalgia" for the Mao era.

In a 2013 article republished in *Communist Review*,<sup>64</sup> Cheng Enfu, vice-director of the Institute of Marxist Studies of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, labelled neo-Maoism as "'traditional' Marxism" and differentiated it from six other strands of contemporary Chinese political thinking. In his view, Chinese "neoliberalism", with its emphasis on deregulation and privatisation, is very similar to the Western interpretation of the theory; "democratic socialism" denies that Marxism is the only relevant worldview, seeks inspiration from Keynes and argues for a multi-party system; "new leftism" is critical of the role of globalisation in China; "revivalism" worships thought from ancient kings and sages; while "eclectic Marxism" is a process where scholars mix contradictory theories together without coming to a clear and definitive conclusion.

The most relevant other theory, he argues, is "innovative Marxism". Emphasising the leading role of Marxism, the Communist Party and public ownership in Chinese society while realising the long-term goal of communism using productive forces, Cheng associates this theory with Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and the idea of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', implying that it is the dominant strand of thinking with the

post-Mao CPC leadership.

Cheng remarks that neo-Maoism has adherents inside and outside the CPC, such as Li Chengrui and Bai Yang. The latter's *Defend Mao Zedong's Flag* can, he considers, be seen as "the manifesto of 'traditional' Marxist thought," incorporating the following key principles:

- The "guiding status" of Mao Zedong Thought should be re-established as this is the founding basis for the People's Republic and CPC rule.
- Mao's later years should be "fairly evaluated", including in particular a practical, realistic, objective and impartial assessment of the Cultural Revolution.
- Mao Zedong Thought should be "vigorously studied" and passed down from generation to generation.
- The "demonisation" of Mao needs to stop. This narrative argues that although the Chinese people still love Mao Zedong, some so-called 'elites' have repeatedly fought against public opinion.

Cheng considers that neo-Maoism has a number of positive traits, including its criticism of "erroneous ideas, especially neoliberalism, democratic socialism and eclectic Marxism." However, he argues that "some forms of criticism, particularly by those defending the Cultural Revolution, tend to go too far" and are reliant on name-calling.

Kerry Brown, former secretary of the British embassy in Beijing, has provided a detailed examination of contemporary Chinese neo-Maoists,<sup>68</sup> despite ridiculing them as like "Japanese in the Southeast Asian jungles" after World War Two. He divides them into three key groups:

- 1 Those who see Mao as a great nationalist icon, representing a strong vibrant China that will no longer be pushed around by the West. They celebrate Mao's ability to speak directly to the agricultural grass roots, and tend to coalesce around Utopia.<sup>69</sup>
- 2 A more ideological group concerned about the growing inequality in China since economic liberalisation in the late 1970s. They argue that the state is increasingly failing to support the very people the 1949 revolution was meant to represent, such as farmers, the proletariat and the underclass.<sup>70</sup> As a result, this group resists further economic liberalisation.<sup>71</sup>
- 3 A group with a more political mission. They argue that, without the Maoist form of communism, China will be divided and weak. This approach could also be regarded as more Leninist, as they argue that the CPC must regain the unique role it had under Mao, creating a strong socialist China. For this group the CPC's monopoly on power must be uncontested.<sup>71</sup>

For Brown these 21st century neo-Maoists, despite a myriad of different political positions, from those who want greater democracy to those who want a stronger dictatorship of the proletariat, are in some ways little different from the Red Guards.<sup>72</sup> They have, he argues, a certain kind of legitimacy as their criticisms of China being run by "venal, self-interested bureaucrats" are, he claims, "often true". This, he claims, is why Bo Xilai was able to gain so much support, and how, partially due to the CPC's ambiguous relationship with Mao, the neo-Maoists are the "true pillar" of opposition to Xi.

Neo-Maoists have responded in different ways to recent political developments in China. In 2018, there was an attempt by workers at Shenzhen Jasic Technology to form their own trade union.<sup>73</sup> This was opposed by the authorities and was a rallying point for neo-Maoists including Utopia, which organised regular protests in favour of the workers.<sup>74</sup>

In May 2021, according to the US-government funded Radio Free Asia (RFA), the CPC cancelled a conference organised by

Maoist intellectuals to coincide with the anniversary of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>75</sup> RFA also reported that several neo-Maoists were detained in the eastern province of Shandong ahead of the CPC's centenary celebrations.<sup>76</sup>

At the start of Xi's third term last year neo-Maoists argued online for more public ownership in the form of a Mao-style "people's economy", as proposed by agricultural scholar Wen Tiejun; while Utopia stated that any criticism of the idea from the private sector would reveal its "guilty conscience".<sup>77</sup> In a 2021 article on the Trotskyist web site *chinaworker.info*, Vincent Kolo argued that many young Chinese Maoists are increasingly supportive of internationalism, feminism, and LGBTQ and ethnic minority rights.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, Indian journalist Ananth Krishnan<sup>79</sup> has argued that neo-Maoists have maintained a "careful silence", other than lavishing praise on Xi.

Zhao Haoyang<sup>80</sup> argues that since 2020 there has been a fourth wave of "Mao Zedong fever" in China, as the working class is struggling to find its new class identity and is reverting to a past orthodoxy as a result. Gu Lingying<sup>81</sup> in contrast argues that the CPC and its members are not revolutionary enough, while the Party is still emphasising the "positive role" of capitalism. Song Chunyu<sup>82</sup> has also argued that a number of CPC cadres fall below expectations, and has warned of the danger of "left politics, right economics."

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that in many ways Xi's leadership has been a staggering success in massively reducing absolute poverty and tackling climate change, along with an amazing expansion of high-speed trains and the very successful Dynamic Zero Covid approach to the pandemic, which has saved millions of lives along with protecting global supply chains.<sup>83</sup> Xi has also massively enhanced China's status in the world, both economically and politically, as it has become a true global force as well as the second largest economy. Once-humiliated China is now powerful and is revitalising some of the Mao internationalism through the 'Belt and Road' initiative,<sup>84</sup> as well as playing a full role in the International Meetings of Communist and Workers Parties.

However, there is no doubt that some sections of Chinese society feel that the economic reforms or liberalisation have gone too far in cementing inequality. This is particularly the case amongst industrial and low paid workers as well as the younger generations who, like their Western counterparts, have to compete in a global economy. Xi therefore may have to take the neo-Maoists seriously, particularly given the way that Mao can be used to rally opposition to inequality or corruption.

The 2021 CPC Centenary historical resolution indicates that the Party leadership takes a more nuanced view of Mao's legacy than do the neo-Maoists. Although Mao Zedong Thought is praised, "mistakes" such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, along with "ten years of domestic turmoil" from 1966 to 1976, are criticised.<sup>85</sup> However, one argument in favour of Xi is that he is trying to find a balance between the economic liberalisation of Deng and the excesses of the Mao era, both controversial to certain sections of Chinese society.

Do the neo-Maoists exist purely in the hope of pushing the CPC leftwards, or do they have a coherent strategy for government? Could a new Bo Xilai emerge to challenge Xi and implement a Maoist programme? Could a form of neo-Maoism even emerge in a globalised China that has Disneyland, skyscrapers, high-speed trains and space rockets? In the coming years we may find out.

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# ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! WE DEMAND CHANGE! ROGER WATERS

Address to the United Nations Security Council 9 February 2023



Madame/Mr President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I feel profoundly honoured to be afforded this singular opportunity to brief your excellencies today. With your forbearance, I shall endeavour to express what I believe to be the feelings of countless of our brothers and sisters all over the world, both here in New York and across the seas. I shall invite them into these hallowed halls to have their say.

We are here to consider possibilities for peace in war-torn Ukraine, especially in light of the increasing volume of weapons arriving in that unhappy country. Every morning, when I sit down at my laptop, I think of our brothers and sisters, in Ukraine and elsewhere, who, through no fault of their own, find themselves in dire and often deadly circumstances. Over there, in Ukraine, they may be soldiers facing another deadly day at the front; or they may be mothers or fathers, facing the awful question how can I feed my child today; or they may be civilians knowing that today the lights will go out, for sure, as they always do in war zones, knowing that there is no fresh water, that there is no fuel for the stove, no blanket, just barbed wire and watch towers and walls and enmity.

Or, they might be over here, in a big rich city like New York. Here brothers and sisters can still find themselves in dire straits. Maybe, somehow, however hard they worked all their lives, they lost their footing on the slippery tilting deck of the neoliberal capitalist ship we call life in the city, and fell overboard to end up drowning. Maybe they got sick, or maybe they took out a student loan, maybe they missed a payment, the margins are slim,

who knows? But now they live on the street in a pile of cardboard, maybe even within sight of this United Nations building. Anyway, wherever they are, all over the world, war zone or not, together they make up a majority, a voiceless majority, and today I shall endeavour to speak for them.

We the people wish to live. We wish to live in peace, in conditions of parity that give us the real opportunity to look after ourselves and our loved ones. We are hard workers and we are ready to work hard. All we need is a fair crack of the whip. Maybe that's an unfortunate choice of idiom, after five hundred years of imperialism, colonialism and slavery. Anyway, please help us.

To help us you may have to consider our predicament, and to do so you may have to take your eye off the ball for a moment, to put your own goals momentarily to one side. What are your goals by the way? And here maybe I direct my inquiries more to the five permanent members of this Council. What are your goals? What is in the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? Bigger profits for war industries? More power globally? A bigger share of the global cake? Is Mother Earth a cake to be gobbled up? Does not a bigger share of the cake mean less for everyone else? What if today, in this place of safety, we were to look in another direction, to look at our capacity for empathy for instance, to put ourselves in others' shoes, like, right now, for instance, the shoes of that chap on the other side of this room, or even the shoes of the voiceless majority, if they have any shoes, that is?

The voiceless majority is concerned that your wars, yes your

wars, for these perpetual wars are not of our choosing, that your wars will destroy the planet that is our home, and along with every other living thing we will be sacrificed on the altar of two things, profits from the war to line the pockets of the very, very, few and the hegemonic march of some empire or other towards unipolar world domination. Please reassure us that that is not your vision, for there is no good outcome down that road. That road leads only to disaster: everyone on that road has a red button in their briefcase, and the further we go down that road, the closer the itchy fingers get to that red button, and the closer we all get to Armageddon. Look across the room: at this level we're all wearing the same shoes.

So back to Ukraine. The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation was illegal. I condemn it in the strongest possible terms. Also, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was not unprovoked, so I also condemn the provocateurs in the strongest possible terms. There, that's got that out of the way.

When I wrote this speech yesterday, I included an observation that the power of veto in this Council only lay in the hands of its permanent members, and that I was concerned that that was undemocratic and rendered this Council toothless. This morning, however, I had a revelation upon waking. Toothless! Maybe toothless is in some ways a good thing. If this is a toothless chamber, I can open my big mouth on behalf of the voiceless without getting my head bitten off. How cool is that?

Anyway, I read in the paper this morning, some anonymous diplomat quoted as saying, "Roger Waters? To address the Security Council? Whatever next? Mr Bean? Ha! ha! ha!" For those of you who don't know, Mr Bean is an ineffectual character in an English comedy show on TV. So it's a penny to a pound the anonymous diplomat is an Englishman, "Ha! ha!"

Ok, I think it's time to introduce my mother, Mary Duncan Waters. She was a big influence on me, she was a schoolteacher. I say was, she's been dead for fifteen years. My father, Eric Fletcher Waters, was a big influence on me too. He too is dead: he was killed on the 18th of February 1944 at Aprilia near the Anzio Bridgehead in Italy, when I was only five months old, so I know something about war and loss. Anyway, back to my Mum. When I was about thirteen, I was struggling with some knotty adolescent problem or other trying to decide what to do, it doesn't matter what it was. I can't remember anyway, but my Mum sat me down and said:

"Now, listen: you're going to be faced with many knotty problems during your life, Roger. And when you are, here's my advice: read, read, read. Find out everything you can about whatever it is, look at it from all sides, all angles, listen to all opinions, especially ones you don't agree with. Research it thoroughly. And when you've done that, you will have done all the heavy lifting, and the next bit is easy."

"Is it? OK, Mum, well, what's the easy bit?"

"Oh, the easy bit is, you just do the right thing."

Phew!

So, speaking of doing the right thing brings me to human rights. We, the people, want universal human rights for all our brothers and sisters all over the world, irrespective of their ethnicity, religion or nationality. To be clear, that would include, but would not be limited to, the right to life and property under the law. For instance? Well, for instance, for Ukrainians. [pause] And, for instance, Palestinians. [pause] Let that sink

in. And obviously, for all the rest of us as well. One of the problems with wars is that in a war zone, or anywhere where the people live under military occupation, there is no recourse to the law, there are no human rights.

Today our brief is the possibility of peace in Ukraine, with special reference to the arming of the Kiev regime by third parties. I'm running out of time so what do the voiceless millions have to say? They say:

"Thank you for hearing us today. We are *many* who do not share in the profits of the war industry.

We do *not* willingly raise our sons or daughters to provide fodder for your cannons.

In our opinion the only sensible course of action today is to call for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine. No ifs, no buts, no ands.

Not one more Ukrainian or Russian life is to be spent. Not one. They are all precious in our eyes."

So, the time has come to speak truth to power. You all remember the story of the Emperor's new clothes? Of course you do. Well, the leaders of your respective empires stand, in one degree or another, naked before us. We have a message for them. It is a message from all the refugees in all the camps, a message from all the slums and favelas, a message from all the homeless, on all the cold streets, from all the earthquakes and floods on Earth. It is also a message from all the people, not quite starving, but wondering how on Earth to make the pittance they earn meet the cost of a roof over their head and food for their families. My mother country England is, thank God, an empire no more, but in that country now, there is a new catch phrase, 'Eat or Heat? You can't do both.' It's a cry echoing round the whole of Europe.

Apparently, the only thing the powers that be think we can all afford is perpetual war. How crazy is that?

So, from the four billion or so brothers and sisters in this voiceless majority, who together with the millions in the international anti-war movement represent a huge constituency: Enough is enough! We demand change!

President Biden, President Putin, President Zelensky,  
USA, NATO, Russia, the EU, all of you,  
Please change course now.

Agree to a ceasefire in Ukraine today.

That, of course, will only be the starting point. But everything extrapolates from that starting point. Imagine the collective global sigh of relief, the outpouring of joy, the international joining of voices in harmony, singing an anthem to peace! John Lennon pumping the air with his fist from the grave. We have finally been heard in the corridors of power. The bullies in the schoolyard have agreed to stop playing nuclear chicken. We're not all going to die in a nuclear holocaust after all. At least, not today. The powers that be have been persuaded to drop the arms race and perpetual war as their accepted *modus operandum*. We can stop squandering all our precious resources on war. We can feed our children, we can keep them warm. We may even learn to cooperate with all our brothers and sisters and even save our beautiful planet home from destruction. Wouldn't that be nice?

Your Excellencies,

I thank you for your forbearance.

■ Transcribed from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APjbroGjtbU>.  
Roger Waters addressed the UN Security Council at the invitation of the Russian Federation.



# SCOPE AND STAKES OF THE 'FRIENDSHIP' BETWEEN PUTIN AND XI

MARC VANDEPITTE

## No-limits partnership

Chinese President Xi Jinping concluded a three-day visit to Russia on March 22. The two countries signed several agreements on economic, technological and cultural cooperation. They want to deepen their 'no limits' partnership, and have also stated their desire to strengthen their strategic relationship. They call for more mutual cooperation on international platforms with the aim of challenging hegemonic practices and creating a multipolar world. Xi has also invited Russian President Vladimir Putin to visit China in the coming months.

Last year, a few weeks before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin and Xi had already met and issued a similar joint statement on international relations and cooperation between the two countries.

This visit comes at a time when the West, led by the United States, is waging a proxy war against Russia and when Washington has launched a Cold War against China. In that context, it is no coincidence that both countries are calling for a new world order in which the US and its allies no longer hold sway, but strive for a multipolar world.

## US supremacy

A look back at recent history is helpful in understanding the scope and stakes of this 'friendship' between Putin and Xi. After the Second World War, the US emerged as the great victor. Washington dreamed of a new world order in which only the US was in charge. Unfortunately, those plans were thwarted by the rapid rebuilding of the Soviet Union and the breaking of the nuclear monopoly.

Half a century later, the American dream came true indeed with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dismantling of the USSR two years later. The US finally became the undisputed leader of world politics and wanted to keep it that way, no longer holding back. The invasion of Panama at the end of 1989 was a test for what would follow. Shortly afterwards it was Iraq, Yugoslavia and Somalia's turns. Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya and Syria would follow later.

Besides overt military interventions, the US also increasingly waged 'hybrid wars' or 'colour revolutions' to implement regime changes, which did not succeed everywhere. They tried this in Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela, Cuba, Honduras, Nicaragua, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon and Belarus. In addition, more than twenty countries have been subjected to economic sanctions.<sup>1</sup>

NATO was created as a force to contain communism in Europe. Today, it entrenches the military supremacy of the US. After the dismantling of the USSR, the organisation has steadily expanded: 14 states on the European continent have joined, while other countries such as Colombia have become 'partners'.

## Shifting world order

So, after the Cold War, the US seemed to have the world to itself. But that was counting without China. For the first time in recent history, a poor, underdeveloped country rose to become an economic superpower in no time.

Since joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001, China's economy has grown more than four times. A few years ago, it surpassed that of the US to become the largest in the

world when based on purchasing power parity. The leap forward is not only economic, but also technological.

China has also developed a new dynamic in which alliances are forged with emerging countries and countries from the South. First there is the BRICS, a partnership of five major emerging countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. There is now talk of expanding this group further, with countries that have traditionally been allies of the West, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Beijing is also the pace-setter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a Eurasian political, economic and security alliance. Russia, China, India and Pakistan are among its eight members. China also recently joined the world's largest economic partnership, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. This Asia-Pacific group accounts for 30% of the world's population.

And then of course there is the Belt and Road Initiative, the new Silk Road. It accounts for hundreds of investments, loans, trade agreements and dozens of Special Economic Zones, worth \$900 bn. They are spread over 72 countries, representing a population of about 5 bn people or 65% of the world's population.

Russia too is forging alliances. The country is a member of several regional and multinational alliances, including the above-mentioned SCO and the military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, which is currently involved in 'peacekeeping' operations in Kazakhstan. Moscow also maintains friendly relations on the African continent and with some Latin American countries.

The war in Ukraine has shown that the countries of the South, where the vast majority of the world's population lives, are not marching along with the warmongering of the West. According to the former prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, "the present war between Ukraine and Russia is caused by the Europeans' love of war, of hegemony, of dominance".<sup>2</sup>

### De-dollarisation<sup>3</sup>

A very important but misunderstood aspect of the shifting world order is de-dollarisation. Indeed, the dominant position of the United States is largely based on the dollar as the world currency. On the one hand, this gives the US unlimited possibilities to pay its government deficits by printing money; and, on the other hand, the US can freeze or confiscate assets of other countries in political disputes, as happened with Iran, Venezuela, Afghanistan and now Russia.

This outrageous advantage and this financial power stand and fall with paying the trade in dollars. And that is exactly what is being questioned more and more.

Russia and China already pay part of their trade no longer in dollars but in their own currency. Russia is asking gas purchasers to pay no longer in dollars but in roubles. China has so-called 'currency swaps' with various other countries, which ensure that trade no longer has to be done in dollars.

Countries such as Venezuela and Iran have long wanted to trade their oil in currencies other than the dollar. Other major oil-exporting countries such as Iraq and Libya have considered this in the past. If countries like Saudi Arabia join this, then the reign of the dollar will be over, which means that the US will lose a lot of power and influence.

The war in Ukraine and heavy economic and financial sanctions against Russia will only accelerate this process of de-dollarisation. If that process continues, the dollar will lose

its status as a key currency. Or, as Gal Luft, co-director of the Institute for Analysis of Global Security, told the Wall Street Journal, "If that block is taken out of the wall, the wall will begin to collapse."<sup>4</sup>

With their trade outside the dollar, Russia and China are setting a trend that could have far-reaching consequences for the financial architecture that has been dominated by the US since WWII.

### A dangerous 'friendship'?

Is this 'friendship' or 'partnership' between Putin and Xi dangerous? That depends on to whom or to what.

In any case, the alliance between the two countries forms an important counterweight to the supremacy of the US. According to Simon Tindall in *The Guardian*, "The birth of this Sino-Russian axis, conceived in opposition to the US-led western democracies, is the most globally significant strategic development since the Soviet Union collapsed 30 years ago. It will define the coming age".<sup>5</sup>

In other words, for the hegemony of the US and of the West, this 'friendship' is dangerous.

For countries in the South that want to steer their own course, free from the stifling straitjacket imposed by the West, this 'friendship' is a step forward. In any case, a recent study<sup>6</sup> has made it clear that a large majority of the population in the South has a positive attitude towards both China (70%) and Russia (66%).

China recently succeeded in reconciling the two arch-rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia, brokering an agreement that offers peace prospects for the entire Middle East. That is in stark contrast to the war-making efforts of the US and the West in this region. In the last 15 years, the US or its allies have besieged or bombed eight countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, Mali, Iraq and Syria.

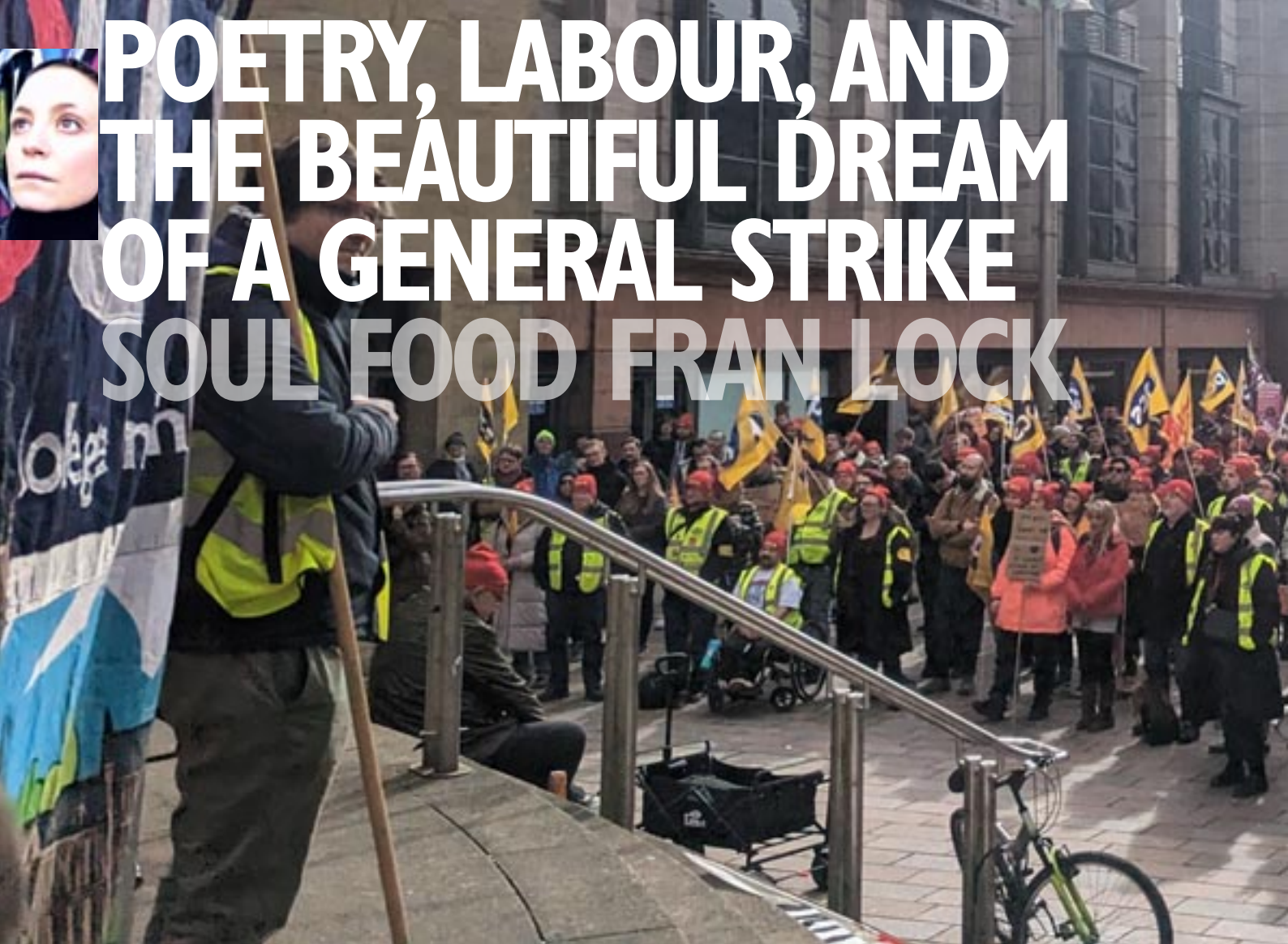
While the US and UK are preventing negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, China has now formulated a peace proposal to stop the war. This proposal was brushed aside by the West, but it was well received by Russia, and at least Ukraine has not rejected it.

The alliance between Russia and China certainly offers better opportunities for the conflict in Ukraine and for world peace in general than the current attitude of the West. If the alliance consolidates and other countries join, we may be entering a new era, where power in the world is more decentralised and more balanced. It remains to be seen whether the West will tolerate that.

As I wrote earlier,<sup>7</sup> these times promise to be exciting, but also dangerous. We need a strong peace movement more than ever.

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# POETRY, LABOUR, AND THE BEAUTIFUL DREAM OF A GENERAL STRIKE

## SOUL FOOD FRAN LOCK

**A**S I BEGAN PREPARING this quarter's column, events – as they often do – overtook me, causing me to reassess what I felt and wanted to say. I'd begun by thinking about industrial action, and reflecting on the unrealised need for a general strike. The last – the only – general strike to take place in Britain was in May 1926. The strike was called by the TUC in support of the miners, who were mired in a bitter dispute with mine owners, who were demanding longer hours for less pay. While initial support was strong (over 1.5 million workers joined in solidarity with the miners) after a gruelling nine days the TUC ended the strike; the miners fought on alone, and ultimately returned to work in November. A painful and palpable defeat. In 1927 the Trades Dispute Act (repealed in 1946) banned "sympathy strikes".

But the idea of the general strike continued – and continues – to haunt British political imagination: fearfully, on the part of elites; for the rest of us, as an expression of hope. We have come close so many times – for example, in 1972, following the arrest of the Pentonville Five who refused to recognise the legitimacy of a court injunction to stop picketing. Their arrests prompted a wave of solidarity strikes, and mass walkouts by dockers, virtually creating an unofficial national strike. The TUC invoked the spectre of an official one-day general strike unless the men were freed, and this idea proved so potent and so threatening to power that the five were released within a week of their arrest.

More fatefully, there is the 'Winter of Discontent', the period between October 1978 and February 1979 when Ford workers, lorry drivers, council workers, and NHS staff all walked out, causing major disruption to public services. In all, around 4.6 m people were involved in strike action. This action has left an

indelible mark on public consciousness, but one that has been tailored and shaped to serve the aims of government. Politicians and their media mouth-pieces are still peddling the legend of a country run by greedy and corrupt unions, permanently on strike, with electricity rationed and garbage piling up in the streets. Yet, most of the groups involved in the action were far below average in terms of how often they went on strike. The relatively weak collective strength, for example, of public sector unions, was largely responsible for their living standards being so badly hurt by rising inflation in the first place. The strikes were disruptive precisely because those involved were not previously strike-prone. And what is left out of the narrative is just how desperate the economic situation was for these marginalised and poorly-paid workers. NHS support staff, working in roles such as catering, cleaning and portering services, began the 1970s with average pay lower than the average unskilled worker. Callaghan's government held pay down, ensuring that real wages for NHS and local council employees dropped a staggering 19%, pushing workers further into poverty. Many of these jobs were being performed by black and brown women who were not only economically, but also socially, vulnerable. This a far cry from the popular image of hard-line union militants, holding the country to ransom. Yet the image has power, and the image persists. It has been cynically deployed to roll back workers' rights and inoculate against empathy for those who strike.

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher came into office, with a ruthless determination to crush organised labour. Amongst numerous mechanisms for achieving this end, the 1982 Employment Act substituted the meaning of trade dispute as occurring "between



employers and workers” to “between workers and their [emphasis added] employer.” Thus, the Act further curtailed secondary actions or sympathy strikes, rendering them unlawful. Previously, union members could take industrial action against their own employer in support of union members engaged in industrial action against a different employer. Further, this legislation narrowed the parameters of what counted as a trade dispute, excluding the possibility of a strike for ‘political’ reasons. Which, when you think about it, is the acme of absurdity: strike action is, definitionally, political.

British workers are in an unusual (and unenviable) position with regard to the right to strike, in that no single such right exists. Workers are instead afforded various scant protections, assuming their industrial action is deemed lawful. If the strike is found to be unlawful, an injunction could be sought against the union. If the union then flouts or refuses to recognise the injunction, it could be found in contempt of court, and its funds sequestered. Or else, it could be sued for damages. In July, the Tory government increased the upper limit for damages, from £250,000 to a whopping £1m. To put it bluntly, there exists no legal mechanism by which unions can declare a general strike.

Yet, the *idea* of such mass action is alive and well. I googled newspaper articles from December last year to the present day, and I counted, without even really trying, six comparisons between our current situation and the ‘Winter of Discontent’, from publications such as the *Telegraph*, the *New Statesman*, the *Spectator*, the *Observer*, the *Financial Times* and the *New York Times*. All of these conjure an image of strike conditions in their most negative and disruptive aspect. Some of them sympathetically acknowledge the grim economic and

ideological causes of the strikes, but none of them really addresses just how difficult it is to meaningfully commit to and coordinate industrial action under current legal conditions. For all the anxious whispers about a return to the ‘bad ol’ days of 1979’, or potential escalation towards a general strike, as of December last year around 822,000 working days had been lost to industrial action, compared with 12m days in 1979, and 162 m in 1926. If anything, it seems as if scaremongering around industrial action has increased in inverse proportion to the rights and powers unions actually have.

I was thinking about this, and about the potential for coordinated action between the TUC’s 48 member unions, when the news broke of the government ‘climb down’ over NHS pay, with the promise of a one-off payment for the current year worth up to 8.2% for the lowest-paid workers, and a potential above-inflation pay rise of 5% for 2023-24. There was a rush to herald this news as some kind of a victory, with the *Guardian* stating that although this still leaves NHS staff below where they were in 2021-2022, it is “considerably more than the government wanted to give.” Strike action continues across other public services, including education, and, at time of writing, ‘intensive talks’ are underway between government and teaching unions. That’s a testament to those on the picket lines, but it’s not an uncomplicated cause for celebration. While NEU members have rejected the teacher pay offer, there’s a real danger that as workers are worn down they become more willing to accept whatever scraps government cares to throw them. If this happens those left will be further isolated and hedged in, in any legal attempt to meaningfully strike.

So far, the small gains strikers have secured are concen-

trated in isolated economic pockets, and any concessions to individual unions take place against a backdrop of curbed rights for striking workers more broadly. For instance, the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill, currently wending its weary way through the House of Lords, aims to make effective strike action across a number of sectors illegal by requiring unions to negotiate “minimum service levels” with their employer before every strike. The Bill affects railway workers, hospital workers, teachers, firefighters, ambulance workers and border staff. Under the terms of the Bill an employer has the right to name individual workers who have then to break their own strike. This has the potential to be weaponised against shop stewards and branch officials, victimising union activists. Further, the minimum service level could be set anywhere: at 50%, 80, 100. If the union does not agree with the employer’s demands, government can intervene to set the level. The implications for chronically underfunded services – for example paramedics – are dire: they cannot provide a service to “prevent risk to life” under present non-strike conditions, so how could they ever legally strike to draw attention to those conditions?

The Bill has now come under serious scrutiny from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, as impinging upon the right to freedom of assembly and association (Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights) so perhaps there is some possibility of curbing its worst excesses. Yet the tactical nature of the Bill is telling – and troubling. It is a link in a long chain of Tory legislation attacking the practical and legal mechanisms by which class solidarity is fostered and finds organised active expression. By doling out limited and circumscribed gains to individual sectors against a broader backdrop of reduced rights the government hopes to break the bonds between cohorts of striking workers; a carrot-and-stick approach that uses small concessions alongside fear of legal and economic sanctions to engineer compliance. What we needed – need – from the outset is strong, mass coordinated action, but this looks less likely by the day. That said, some comfort can be taken in the fact that the government must resort to laws to forbid the expression of solidarity; it shows precisely the strength of our tendency to stand in sympathy with one another. This thought should galvanise us.

But what does any of this have to do with poetry? And what can poetry usefully contribute? Here, I am wary of bold claims. Art is not a substitute for legal protection or economic justice, neither can it be said to effectively deliver those things. However, as the poetry I want to introduce today amply demonstrates, it does have an absolutely vital role to play in building the foundations for collective class struggle, and I think it does so in three distinct ways:

Firstly, as a space of counter-narrative testimony: poetry erects an alternative history against the reductive and damaging narratives the government and mainstream media have tried so desperately to cement in cultural memory. As cultural memory scholar Astrid Erll has noted “there is no collective memory without individual actualisation.”<sup>1</sup> Poetry attends to the individual memories of striking workers, particularising collective struggle in vividly embodied ways that complicate the vision of unions as a homogenous organisation with identical aims and experiences, and feeding these more nuanced representations of ourselves back into wider culture. Poetry can be a site of infiltration into public history for those of us who are denied access to that history by other, more direct routes. It is, then, both a means of preservation – of archiving and transmitting our own stories – and a form of resistance to – or subversion of – the

narratives others make around us.

Secondly, poetry offers an alternative scene of imaginative solidarity, one that is untouched by the legal, temporal, and geographical restrictions hedging our free association in the physical world. Again, because of poetry’s intimacy and its focus on close, sustained attention, it allows us to perceive and to foster the connections governments have tried so hard to practically prohibit. Further, because of poetry’s special atemporal quality we can apprehend the threads of connection between our own, present experience of class struggle and those of our forecomrades and cross-cultural counterparts.

Finally, poetry provides an opportunity to imagine an otherwise, beyond the necessary restrictions of practical organisation. In its potentially infinite spaces we can dream what must be dreamed before it can be enacted. This column’s poets dream of a global rising that brings about liberation for all. It is my pleasure to share these poems with you.

In Fred Voss’s ‘Can Revolutions Start in Washrooms?’, from the recently released *Someday There Will Be Machine Shops Full of Roses*, the speaker places us alongside him, in front of the “washroom mirror”, confronting the scars – bodily and emotional – of dirty and difficult manual work: “all my life,” he tells us, “I’ve seen the working man beaten down/ unions broken/ wages falling/ as CEO salaries skyrocket and stockbrokers get rich”. The linking alliterative whoosh of that long line, especially of “skyrocket” and “stockbroker” through their internal rhymes, creates an image of acceleration and ease of movement, of a wealthy elite bound not even by gravity. In contrast, the earth-bound lives of the workers feel laboured and heavily embodied. Voss shows how work – and the inequality that structures the experience of that work – takes its toll in material and daily ways: the heart-breaking image of “Earl on the turret lathe”, retying “shoelaces that keep breaking” and blinking through “30-year-old glasses”, or 72-year old Ariel, “with swollen arthritic fingers and joking/ about working until he drops”, or Teddy, who operates the gantry mill, washing “stinking black machine grease” from his hands. I think what gives this poem its unusual power is its particular and striking portrayal of vulnerable working-class masculinity. Without resorting to sentimental appeal, the poem shows us how intimately inequality operates on the lives and bodies of these men, but also the dignified stoicism and quiet solidarity expressed by those who labour under such conditions.

Voss’s poem articulates a wish for revolutionary praxis, transforming Teddy’s comment that the management owner of a new Jaguar parked outside is “making too much money!” into “the musket shot/ that set off the storming/ of the Bastille.” In that instant, the survival strategy of deadpan humour is transformed from a coping mechanism to an inciting and radical one. Throughout the poem, Voss interrogates both personal responsibility and social conditions; when the speaker despairs that he has “never heard one word/ of revolt” despite all that the men have endured, we understand that the “silence” of these workers exists within a context of mental and bodily exhaustion. These are men who have “twisted chuck handles” until their “wrists screamed”, leaned their “bodies against screaming drill motors meeting/ cruel deadlines until we thought/ our hearts would burst.” These conditions might provoke revolutionary anger, but they also wear out bodies and minds for the fight. That repeated use of “scream” to describe both men and machines is telling: so much of the men’s lives and identities is swallowed by their job. Teddy’s “musket shot” words, then are not meant first and foremost for the workers on the job. They

are meant for us, a call to stand in solidarity and strength with the overburdened and exploited.

‘Work’ by Martin Hayes is taken from the forthcoming pamphlet, *Machine / Language*. Similarly to ‘Can Revolutions Start in Washrooms?’, the poem is concerned with our enmeshment in labour, its toll on the body and mental landscape of the worker. But ‘Work’ shows us this intimate (and insidious) entanglement by other means: personifying work as an uncanny stalking presence, or a predatory threat, figuring it both as a hand-holding whisperer, who “speaks to you in your ear/ about the things you should’ve done/ the things/ you shouldn’t have done”, and a “pack of hungry dogs”, snapping their jaws. For Hayes’ speaker, work is not merely a job with a clearly delineated beginning and end, for which the worker receives economic compensation. It is, rather, “constant”, “behind you/ in front of you/ circling around you”. It’s where you’re from and where you’re headed; it has infiltrated your memories, colonised your imagination, stunted and sucked the colour from your engagement with the world. What makes this poem so chilling, and so important is the image of work “still there/ staring at you/ wanting to know/ this or that” even after the speaker has come home, taken off their boots, switched on the television and opened a can of beer. Work’s presence is inescapable, and it alters even our relationship to the few simple pleasures we are able to afford. With deft understatement, Hayes shows us that the burden of work extends far beyond the nine-to-five of the job we do. The poem is purposefully vague in its definition of work, and its use of direct address places each and every reader in the position of beleaguered worker. This is not, as with Voss’s poem, an affecting portrait of particular work and workers, but a stark look at the mechanism by which the capitalist labour market operates: “there is no respite from it” writes Hayes, isolating that one line within the blank space of the page, allowing the full gravity of that statement, and its frightening implications, to sink in and settle. It is a statement that applies to all of us. It is utterly bleak, but in its universality there is the possibility of understanding and connection between all of us who labour, however different our struggles may outwardly appear.

In his brand-new ‘Once Upon a Time (Grandad tells a story)’, Kevin Patrick McCann distils the age-old cycle of criminalisation, poverty, and despair, that has haunted working-class people since time immemorial. The poem’s power comes from its pairing of the standard fairy-tale formula (‘Once Upon a Time’) with the grinding injustice of grim economic reality: its very simplicity is the source of its horror. The reason injustice persists is not complicated, and the poem follows its workings – its stepping stones of cause and effect – through the course a single human life. The unnamed subject begins as a “Union man”, is sacked by his boss for his activities, and becomes a “jobless man” who cannot pay rent to his landlord and is evicted from his home, then a “homeless man” who cannot secure other work because he is “blacklisted”. By the fourth stanza, when McCann’s subject is forced to beg on the street, he is no longer awarded the epithet “man” at all, but is now recognised only as a “a beggar”, a “work-shy scrounger” and ultimately an “ex-con” by the magistrate who administers him. There is such a freight of past and present pain at the back of this poem: the gradual dehumanisation of workers who lose not only their jobs, but their identities, their dignity, their families, and their homes.

This loss of livelihood, community, and self is relayed over the course of five stanzas, implying a long, slow historical – as

well as individual – diminishment. The sixth stanza, however, sums up the relatively static destiny of the rich: “There was this Boss/ Who was also a Landlord/ As well as Local Magistrate/ And now, Upon a Time, still is.” While the downward potential of the working-class is bottomless, the upper-class stay still, consolidate their power. Your boss might not literally be the same person as your landlord or local magistrate, but they belong to the same class cohort, and they act against you accordingly. They always have. The poem is as bleak as it is historically attentive, but it carries with it the promise of oral transmission between and across generations. The “Grandad” who is telling this story is surely passing on the history of class oppression to future generations, who, better armed with understanding can locate themselves in a continuity of struggle, and arm themselves for the ongoing fight.

### **Can Revolutions Start in Washrooms?**

by Fred Voss

I’m standing  
in front of the washroom mirror washing up  
after another day’s work  
all my life  
I’ve seen the working man beaten down  
unions broken  
wages falling  
as CEO salaries skyrocket and stockbrokers get rich  
and politicians talk of ‘trickle down’  
and ‘the land of opportunity’  
and ‘the American way’  
and Earl on the turret lathe  
keeps tying and retying his shoelaces that keep breaking  
and blinks through 30-year-old glasses and finally  
gives up his car  
to ride the bus to work  
and Ariel on the Cincinnati milling machines turns 72  
heaving 80-pound vises onto steel tables  
with swollen arthritic fingers and joking  
about working until he drops  
all my life I’ve wondered  
why we men who’ve twisted chuck handles  
until our wrists screamed  
shoved thousands of tons of steel into white-hot blast  
furnaces  
under midnight moons  
leaned our bodies against screaming drill motors meeting  
cruel deadlines until we thought  
our hearts would burst  
are silent  
as the owners build their McMansions on hills and smoke  
big  
cigars driving a different  
\$100,000 leased car to work each month  
why after bailing out the banks  
losing our houses  
seeing our wages slashed  
and our workloads rise  
I’ve never heard one word  
of revolt  
and Teddy the bear of a gantry mill operator  
walks into the washroom to wash  
all the razor-sharp steel chips

and stinking black machine grease off  
his arms and hands  
he's been driving the same cheap motorcycle  
for 20 years and says,  
'Hey which front office person is driving  
that brand new Jaguar I see parked out there now?'  
and none of us can answer  
as we raise our heads from the sinks  
'Well, whoever it is,' Teddy says,  
'They're making too much money!'

After 40 years of silence  
I can't help wishing his words could be like the musket  
shot  
that set off the storming  
of the Bastille.

### Work

by Martin Hayes

it is constant  
it walks beside you  
when you should've left it behind

it sits next to you on the tube  
holds your hand  
speaks to you in your ear  
about the things you should've done  
the things  
you shouldn't have done

along the Edgware Rd up to home

like a pack of hungry dogs  
you  
trying to keep your arse away  
from its snapping jaws

inside you take your boots off  
wash  
switch on the tele  
open a can of beer

it is still there  
staring at you  
wanting to know  
this or that

there is no respite from it

it is the only thing that pays for the rent  
the food the electricity the toothpaste  
the plasters Bonjela codeine and wine

without it  
you are homeless  
with it  
you are a slave  
and constantly  
it reminds you of this

### Once Upon a Time (Grandad tells a story)

by Kevin Patrick McCann

There was this Union man  
But the Boss found out and sacked him.

Once Upon a Time  
There was this jobless man  
Couldn't pay the rent so him and his family  
Were swiftly evicted.

Once upon a Time  
There was this homeless man left his wife  
And kids in the workhouse while he went  
On the tramp but couldn't find work  
Because he was blacklisted.

Once upon a Time  
There was this beggar collapsed in the street  
And was soon up before the Beak  
Who told him he was a work-shy scrounger  
And gave him hard labour  
For twenty-four weeks.

Once Upon a Time  
There was this ex-con, newly released,  
Finds out his wife and son both died  
In the workhouse so was dragged off  
To the Asylum where he dies as well.

Once Upon a Time  
There was this Boss  
Who was also a Landlord  
As well as Local Magistrate  
And now, Upon a Time, still is.

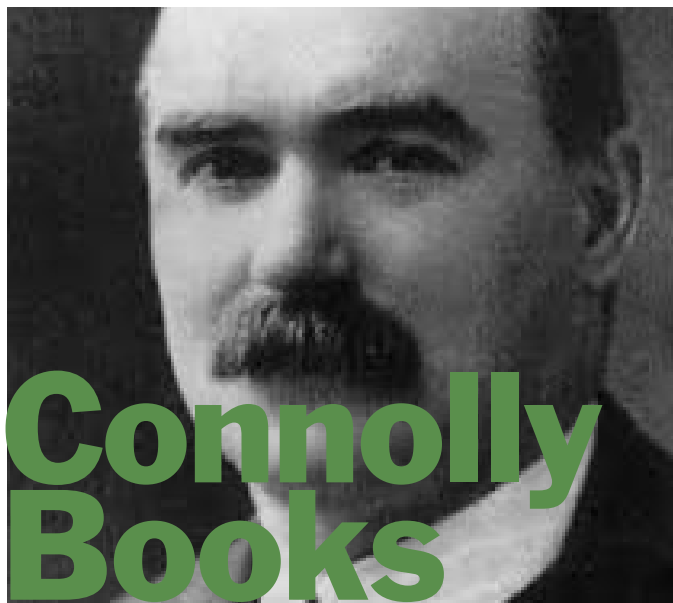
**Fred Voss** has written several collections of poetry, including *The Earth and the Stars in the Palm of Our Hand* (Culture Matters, 2016), *Robots Have No Bones* (Culture Matters, 2019), and the recently released *Someday There Will Be Machine Shops Full of Roses* (Smokestack, 2023).

**Martin Hayes** has worked in the courier industry for 30 years. He is the author of numerous poetry collections, including *Ox*, (Knives Forks and Spoons Press, 2021), *Underneath* (Smokestack, 2021) and the digital pamphlet *Machine / Language* (Culture Matters, 2023).

**Kevin Patrick McCann** has published eight collections of poetry for adults, and one for children, as well as the recent digital pamphlet, *The Haunting: Deleted Scenes* (Culture Matters, 2022). Kevin is the author of *It's Gone Dark* (The Otherside Books, 2020) a collection of ghost stories, and *Ov* (Beul Aithris Publications, 2020), a fantasy novel for children. A new full collection of poems, *Deleted Scenes*, will be forthcoming later this year.

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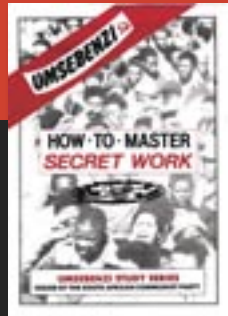
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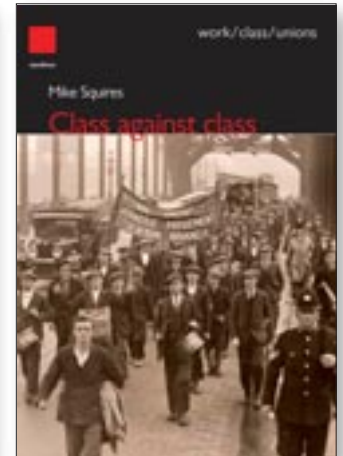
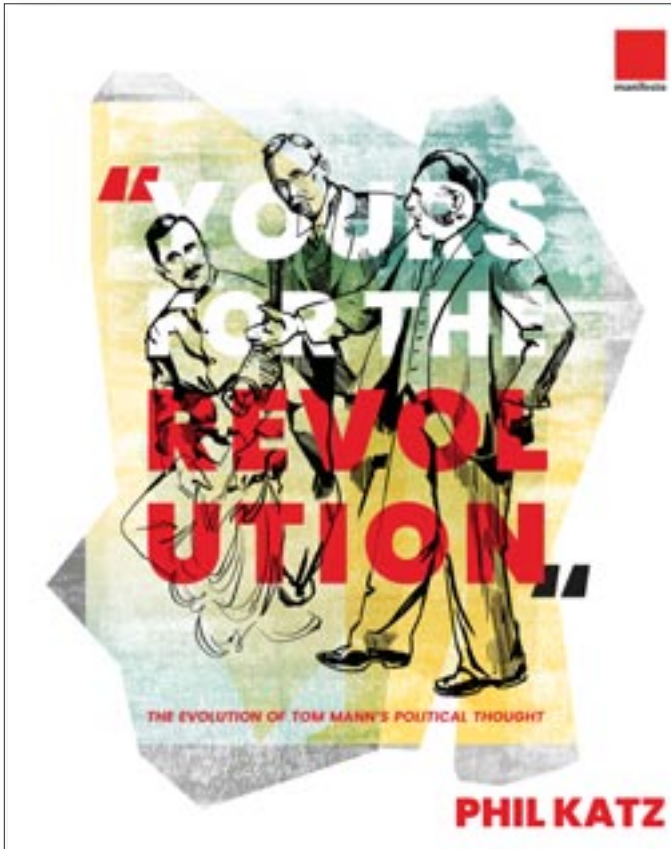
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