

Editorial

Issue Three of *Common Voice* was put together during, and in the aftermath of, the bloody slaughter of ordinary men, women and children from a wide range of social backgrounds in London, Egypt, Turkey and Baghdad. While families and friends continue to mourn, news programmes, the press and the alternative media have devoted huge amounts of airtime, column inches and bandwidth in an attempt to come to terms with these tragic events. In this context it may seem rather insensitive of us to devote an issue of *Common Voice* to the nuances of how a future post-capitalist society might organise production, how Marx viewed capitalist progress, or the (ir)relevance of ‘ultra-leftism’ at a time when revolution is not on the agenda. Yet among the more progressive elements of the alternative media there is agreement that any solution to terrorism, state violence, religious hatred and racism must point to a different set of values to those propagated by the warmongers and fundamentalists. In this sense *Common Voice* will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with those who argue that another world is not only possible but eminently desirable.

This issue kicks off with a lengthy, in-depth analysis of the ‘Economic Calculation Argument,’ by Robin Cox. Cox uncovers the main assumptions of the argument which rests upon the idea that a post-capitalist economic arrangement cannot function effectively without the ‘guiding hand’ of the market. In exposing the fallacies of the ECA (based upon the idea that a post-capitalist economy would necessarily involve central planning) Cox demonstrates the viability of a de-centralised, non-market economy based upon a self-regulating system of stock control and ‘calculation in kind.’ Cox’s analysis deserves a wide audience and will be particularly welcomed by those in the anti-market, anti-state sector who call for more concrete examples of how socialism might work ‘in practice.’ Those who fear complex economic jargon – or are mindful of Bob Black’s warning in the *Abolition of Work* that a free society cannot have *Homo Economicus* at its centre – should perhaps be reminded that goods and services will still need to be produced, distributed and consumed in a global society beyond capitalism.

In ‘Ten Blokes that Failed to Shake the World,’ Stuart Watkins and Dave Flynn take issue with the various ‘ultra-leftist’ groupuscles whom they argue have failed to submit their own theories and practices to historical critique, preferring instead to remain as the “unsullied guardians of communist ideas.” Describing their move away from ultra-leftism, Watkins and Flynn take issue with its neglect of a practical programme of political action in the here and now, particularly in an era when mass working-class action is sporadic and revolutionary socialism remains a distant dream. Rather disappointingly Watkins and Flynn fail to outline what this might mean in practice beyond a brief mention of workplace organisation, anti-war coalitions and other “consciousness-raising” activities. Perhaps they will elaborate on this further in a future issue of *Common Voice*.

In Issue One of *Common Voice*, Jeff Shantz (a member of the North-Eastern federation of Anarcho-Communists) sketched out some common ground between radical ecological thought and theories which draw upon histories of working-class struggle. In this issue Shantz continues this theme by showing how the ideas of feminist, unionist and ‘*Earth First!er*’, the late Judi Bari, demonstrate a possible synthesis of radical ecological and socialist/anarchist theory. By drawing upon her experiences of workplace organising and belonging to a non-hierarchical environmental organisation, Bari is able to move beyond the reformism of much green thought by asserting that the problems which groups such as *Earth First!* address can only be challenged by a social movement with the aim of fundamentally transforming the social relations of industrial capitalism.

While Shantz only hints at the potential of feminism for informing anti-market, anti-state thinking in Bari's work, the article by Jim Davis tackles feminism head-on, showing how its various insights need to be incorporated into the struggle to transcend capitalism. Davis shows how elements of feminism (like those of the 'left' in general) have historically been recuperated by capital and urges its remaining liberatory elements to engage in a total critique of everyday life in order to avoid this recuperation. Davis suggests – and I hope that most of us would agree with him – that a movement to liberate humanity cannot leave the question of patriarchy until “after the revolution”; the struggle against sexism and the sexual division of labour must carry on in the here and now as an element of the broader fight for a world without markets, states and social classes.

In a reprint from a 1952 Freedom Press pamphlet (submitted by Richard Alexander) Tony Gibson attempts an answer to a question we hear only too often: in a post-capitalist society, “who will do the dirty work?” Gibson's often humorous answer lies in an analysis of work under capitalism which is both de-humanising and coercive. With the abolition of the wages system and the introduction of production for use, work has the potential to become intrinsically satisfying and with economic and political coercion removed, even ‘dirty’ work such as cleaning sewers may become relatively congenial tasks, carried out without compulsion for the good of the community.

One solution to the problem of cleaning sewers under capitalism not yet considered by politicians (but give them time) is to force those convicted of anti-social behaviour to do the dirty work. Blair's Labour government in Britain is currently on a crusade against all forms of ‘anti-social behaviour’ such as drunkenness and petty theft, which is apparently sweeping our towns and cities making us prisoners in our own homes. What we are witnessing in Britain is in fact an unprecedented crackdown, not only against working-class youth but also on campaigners and protestors, together with the widening of the powers of the police and the state. In this context it may be interesting to ask, as an article from *bristle* magazine does in this issue, who (or what) is *really* anti-social? Is it the group of youngsters wearing ‘hoodies’ hanging out on street corners at 9 o' clock at night, or illegal wars, shoot to kill policies and the privatisation of more and more areas of public space?

To my knowledge Marx never had to worry about Anti-Social Behaviour Orders or curfews, but he was concerned with the vexing question of how ‘progressive’ the capitalist mode of production was. Michael Handelman criticises the traditional interpretation of Marx's views on capitalism, imperialism and progress by showing that Marx himself changed his position from a broadly positive one in his earlier writings to a far more negative and critical view of capitalist progress in his later writings. Using the example of Ireland and, in particular, Russia, Handelman demonstrates how Marx came to reject the view of capitalism as ‘progressive’ and focused instead on the revolutionary potential of the Russian peasant communes. Even so, as Handelman argues, Marx was never to completely abandon his view of capitalism as a ‘necessary evil’ on the road to socialism.

Bringing things more up to date Chris Marsh addresses some of the same issues as Handelman as well as Watkins and Flynn in her article *What future for socialism/communism?* One answer is that socialism/communism still has a future as a viable alternative to capitalism, but that those of us who hold this to be the case must “unlearn our learning” and jettison some of the old certainties and dogmas characteristic of revolutionary Marxism. In particular Marsh urges us to learn from both attempts at alliance building on the left and from the permaculture movement which through its actions are attempting to help stave off land degradation and ensure that we still have a world left to win. While Marsh's polemic perhaps raises more questions than

it answers, her intervention is surely to be welcomed and we hope it will generate debate and discussion along with the other articles in this issue.

The issue is rounded off nicely with Torgun Bullen reviewing the work of Simon Baron-Cohen on autism, and a poem by Toija French. We welcome reviews of books, pamphlets, journals, films, websites etc. as well as poems, short commentaries and letters. Please see our submissions page for more details.

Julian Prior

August 2005

The "Economic Calculation" controversy: unravelling of a myth

Robin Cox

The economic calculation argument (ECA) has to do with the claim that, in the absence of market prices, a socialist economy would be unable to make rational choices concerning the allocation of resources and that this would make socialism an impracticable proposition. Tracing the historical development of this argument, this article goes on to consider some of its basic assumptions about how the price mechanism actually works in practice; in so doing, it attempts to demonstrate that the argument is based upon fundamentally shaky foundations. A rational approach to the allocation of resources in a socialist economy is then sketched out. Such an approach is predicated on a particular view of socialism as entailing a largely decentralised – or polycentric – structure of decision-making in contrast to the view typically held by proponents of the ECA that socialism would entail central – or societywide – planning. Applying a decentralised model of socialist decision-making, this article identifies a number of key components of such a model and goes on to show how, through the interactions of these key components, the objections to socialism raised by the ECA are decisively overcome.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The "economic calculation argument" (ECA) is principally linked with the Austrian economist, Ludwig von Mises, who wrote a seminal tract ("Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth") in 1920, purporting to show that socialism was not a realisable system. Mises was not alone in developing this argument; his contemporaries Boris Brutzkus and Max Weber had independently arrived at the same conclusions that same year. Moreover, a number of earlier commentators – for example, Gossen, Wicksteed, Wieser, Bohm-Bawerk, Pareto, Barone and particularly the Dutch economist, Nikolaas Pierson – had all developed partial elaborations of the ECA before Mises¹.

Following the Russian revolution and the emergence of Soviet state capitalism, a vigorous debate ensued on the feasibility of socialism, a term which had been widely understood to be synonymous with Marx's non-market communism (or, at the very least, meant a system lacking a market for "factors of production" if not consumer goods). The developments in Russia, while serving to stimulate the debate, nevertheless helped to muddy the waters considerably. Thus, Lenin departed sharply from the classical Marxian definition of socialism as a synonym for communism by portraying it instead as a stage between capitalism and communism. The aborted attempt to introduce so called "war communism" in 1918-1921 (in reality, a rigorous system of centralised rationing which, moreover, still retained elements of the market, rather than "free access" communism) was a further source of confusion; it allowed anti-socialists to argue that socialism had been shown to be impracticable in practice and not just in theory. This, of course, completely overlooked the fact Marxists too had argued that socialism was not feasible in Russia at the time given that the necessary preconditions for a socialist revolution to occur had not yet ripened – a mass working class imbued with socialist understanding and a sufficiently developed means of production.

O'Neill contends that it is wrong to suppose there was just one single unified debate at the time. Instead, there were "at least two debates that concerned two independent objections to socialism"². The first of these was about "rational choice and commensurability" which is central to the ECA itself. The second, mainly instigated by Mises' torchbearer, F A Hayek, had to do with an "epistemic objection to socialism" concerning centralised – or society wide – planning and the dispersal of knowledge among economic actors in an economy. While these two different streams of discourse may have been conducted along relatively independent lines I will argue (later) that they are nevertheless organically linked. Indeed, much of what is demonstrably false about the ECA stems from a misconceived and myopic assumption that socialism can only be a centrally planned

economy, a claim that Mises himself tirelessly promoted. This, however, effectively precludes the possibility of a spontaneously ordered or decentralised version of socialism which alone, I would maintain, decisively overcomes the objections to socialism raised by the ECA.

The high watermark of the "economic calculation" controversy was in the 1920s and 30s. O'Neill distinguishes between an earlier and relatively neglected German-speaking phase of the debate which pitted Mises and his supporters against the likes of Otto Neurath, Karl Polanyi and Otto Bauer, and a later English-speaking phase which involved neoclassical "market socialists" like Fred Taylor and Oskar Lange. In the 1940s Mises reputation as a free market economist waned along with the free market itself, as the fashion for Keynesian state intervention took hold. It was only after the failure of Keynesian reformism in the 1970s and the collapse of state capitalist regimes in Eastern Europe in the 1980s that Mises' ideas were rescued from obscurity and underwent a partial revival.

2. AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

So what exactly is the ECA about? To elucidate its core claims it would be helpful to use a hypothetical – and highly simplified – example.

Assume a factory in socialism manufactures a particular kind of consumer good, X. Assume that in order to manufacture X only two kinds of inputs are needed, A and B. Let us then suppose that there are three different methods for producing 1 unit of X which involve three different combinations of A and B, as follows:

Method 1 requires 9 units of A and 10 units of B
Method 2 requires 10 units of A and 9 units of B
Method 3 requires 10 units of A and 10 units of B

This prompts the question: which method should this factory chose in order to produce 1 unit of X? One might argue that it would make sense to use as few resources as possible to produce a given output since that would leave more resources over for doing other things. This alludes to what economists call "opportunity cost". The opportunity cost of doing something is the best alternative you forego as a result. If you use a certain quantity of resources to produce one thing then you deny yourself the opportunity of using those same resources to produce something else. By minimising your opportunity costs you maximise the amount of resources that can be used for other purposes.

In terms of our example, this would require our factory at the outset to reject method 3. Why? Because while method 3 uses the same number of units of B as method 1, it uses more units of A. Compared with method 2, on the other hand, it uses the same number of units of A but more of B. So methods 1 and 2 are both more "technically efficient" than method 3. This means they do not make use of any more of either A or B than method 3 while using less of at least one of these inputs than method 3. In other words, there is no opportunity cost involved in rejecting 3 in favour of 1 or 2 assuming the output is identical in each case. However it is possible method 3 may result in a slightly higher quality version of X because of the additional unit of A or B used (compared to method 1 or 2) in which case a small opportunity cost might be incurred.

All this is fairly straightforward and there is no suggestion by proponents of the ECA that a socialist economy cannot ascertain whether one method of producing something is more – or less – technically efficient than another. A socialist economy will have no problem in seeing the need to reject method 3. The problem arises when we come to chose, in the case of our example, between the remaining methods 1 and 2. How would we know which of these two methods made least use of resources, thereby freeing up more resources for other uses? Here we encounter a quite different notion of efficiency – namely, economic efficiency. According to the ECA this requires us to

directly compare A and B by reducing each to a common denominator so that we can select the least costly combination of A and B – method 1 or method 2 – to produce 1 unit of X. For that, it is argued, you need a price system, allowing units of A and B to be costed in money terms. So if 1 unit of A cost one dollar and 1 unit of B cost 2 dollars, the total cost of producing 1 unit of X using method 1 would be 29 dollars and 28 dollars using method 2. Therefore, it would be advisable for the factory to select method 2 as the “least costly combination” of inputs A and B.

The problem is that a socialist factory would not have recourse to monetary prices in order to make such a “rational decision”. Socialism is based on the common ownership of the means of production. Without private property in the means of production, according to Mises, there can be no market for the means of production. Without a market for a means of production, it will be impossible to attach monetary prices to the means of production. Without monetary prices, reflecting the relative scarcity of these inputs, socialist decision-makers will be unable rationally to calculate how best to allocate these inputs in a way that ensures economic efficiency. In other words they will be unable to compare the proceeds of any economic activity with the costs incurred to determine whether it was worthwhile or not – that is to say, whether or not it realises a “net income”. The likelihood then is that these decision-makers “groping in the dark” will select more, rather than less, costly combinations of inputs and so use up more resources than would be the case had they recourse to a system of monetary prices. The cumulative effect of such economically inefficient decision-making would be to precipitate a sharp fall in output and living standards which the population is unlikely to accept. Hence Mises’ claim that “Socialism is not a realizable system of society’s economic organization because it lacks any method of economic calculation”³.

3. PRELIMINARY CRITICISMS OF THE MISESIAN MODEL

At first blush, the ECA would appear to be highly plausible. However, on closer inspection we can discern hairline fractures in the very foundations of this model which render it highly vulnerable to sustained criticism. Let us consider some of these defects first before turning our attention to the organisation of production and the allocation of production goods in a socialist economy.

A) Subjective valuation and price

According to Mises and the Austrian School of Economics, the value of goods and services is necessarily subjective and does not inhere in the good or service in question; economic costs are essentially subjective, opportunity costs and utility preferences can only be expressed along an ordinal scale – i.e. ranked – as opposed to a cardinal scale which entails precise measurement. How then do we arrive at the necessary data upon which a system of economic calculation is predicated? Salerno puts it thus. The problem with socialism, he claims, is that it lacks “a genuinely competitive and social market process in which each and every kind of scarce resource receives an objective and quantitative price appraisal in terms of a common denominator reflecting its relative importance in serving (anticipated) consumer preferences. This social appraisal process of the market transforms the substantially qualitative knowledge about economic conditions acquired individually and independently by competing entrepreneurs, including their estimates of the incommensurable subjective valuations of individual consumers for the whole array of final goods, into an integrated system of objective exchange ratios for the myriads of original and intermediate factors of production. It is the elements of this coordinated structure of monetary price appraisements for resources in conjunction with appraised future prices of consumer goods which serve as the data in the entrepreneurial profit computations that must underlie a rational allocation of resources.”⁴

But what is actually happening in this "transformation process" whereby the "incommensurable subjective valuations" of individuals purportedly come to be expressed as objective exchange ratios or prices? Do the latter in fact actually capture the former? There is a kernel of truth in the claim that they do in that obviously if someone is willing to pay a price for a good he or she must *ipso facto* subjectively value that good. Otherwise the "willingness to pay" for it would not have arisen. But, of course, in a market economy mere "willingness to pay" is not enough; the means of payment – purchasing power- is what is crucially required and it is only willingness to pay that is backed up by purchasing power that actually affects prices. This is what economists call "effective demand" (presumably to be distinguished from "ineffective demand"). The subjective valuation that a pauper places on a square meal may be considerable but in the absence of the wherewithal to pay for such a meal, this counts for nothing. In short, the subjective valuations individuals place on goods cannot reasonably be said to be captured or embodied by the objective prices such goods attract in the market. Indeed, one might add that to suggest that they do, flatly contradicts a key myth of bourgeois economics – namely, that our wants are essentially "infinite" and the resources to meet them, limited.

It may be objected that while it does not aim to "quantify" our wants as such (along a cardinal scale), price does nevertheless reflect our subjective valuations insofar as it sheds light on our preferences (along an ordinal scale). Thus, if we prefer roast beef to a McDonald's hamburger this will be reflected in the higher price we would be willing to pay for such an item. However, this still does not get round the basic problem: in a market economy you cannot express a preference if you do not have the means to do so: purchasing power. You might prefer roast beef but after consulting your wallet may discover to your consternation that you will just have to resign yourself to the hamburger instead. While, according to conventional economics, effective demand determines price in conjunction with supply of the goods demanded, this effective demand is itself grossly unequally distributed by virtue of the unequal distribution of income. Austrians respond to this by arguing that such differentials reflect the valuations individuals place on different occupations and the different contributions they make to society (which "society" duly "rewards" them for) but there is no way of testing this claim since such valuations are themselves subject to the limitations of "effective demand". Salerno's "integrated system of objective exchange ratios" (prices) reflects or is conditioned by, this unequal distribution of effective demand. Thus, frivolous luxury goods can be "valued" more highly – i.e., attract a higher price – than food for the hungry because a rich elite has vastly more purchasing power at its disposal to competitively bid for, and so push up the price of, the former compared to the latter.

We should bear these points in mind in considering the merits or otherwise of the ECA; it is based on so-called objective data that are fundamentally biased or skewed and cannot be said to correspond truthfully to the subjective valuations of economic actors in the market as claimed. To believe otherwise is to commit what is called the Fallacy of Composition – the illusion that what is true for each part of a whole must be true for the whole. It is an error that overlooks the interrelationships between the different parts of the whole.

B) What do we mean by "costs"?

D R Steele contends: "The total cost of producing anything is the total effect in reducing production of other things because of the factors used up. This what we mean by the 'cost of production'. It is this that we always want to minimise when we produce anything"⁵. As we saw earlier, this definition of cost equates with opportunity cost. Opportunity costs are often counter-posed to accounting costs. The latter are usually taken to denote the explicit costs represented by the cash outlays that a firm makes in purchasing its inputs, whereas the former are associated with implicit or hidden costs and may be difficult or impossible to quantify, or even be completely unknown. For example, the opportunity cost of spending more money on a new school may be to forego spending

this money on improving the local ambulance service which could have meant more lives being saved. But just how do you weigh up the cost of a life?

Going back to our example of consumer good X, we can see that the ECA relies on the notion of accounting cost rather than opportunity cost, despite its copious lip service to the latter. This is because it involves comparing the explicit cash outlays to be made on different combinations of A and B to arrive at a notional "least cost combination". Certainly there is an opportunity cost in making that decision – this almost goes without saying – but this is not what this example of economic calculation is about. It is not measuring what a factory foregoes in opting to produce 1 unit of Y using method 2. Choosing a least cost combination of factors has essentially to do with accounting costs, not opportunity costs. That being so, one might well ask, how does this help one to calculate the "total effect in reducing production of other things because of the factors used up"? Acknowledging there is, theoretically speaking, a "total effect" is not the same as saying that this is what is being precisely measured – or, indeed, that it can ever be precisely measured. Moreover, who decides which is the "best alternative foregone"? One person's preference may not be another's. Such considerations are simply brushed under the carpet by the ECA.

Nevertheless, it is on the point of "precise measurement" that the ECA presses its claim. As Steele points out: "In this case, it so happens that it would be sufficient merely to know which was 'more' or 'less' but that is just an accident of the way I have set up the example. Generally, we should have to know exactly how much more or less. For instance, if the choice were between a method using 4lbs of rubber and 5 pounds of wood and a method using 5 lbs of rubber and 3 pounds of wood, it would not be enough to know that wood were more costly by weight, then rubber; we should need to know how much more costly"⁶.

Certainly, accounting costs are amenable to "exact calculation" using monetary prices but the question is what exactly is being accounted for in the process?. "Precise measurements" doesn't tell us much; a game of monopoly entails precise measurement too but nobody suggests this implies some earth-shattering insight we would be foolish to overlook. What then is the significance of what is being precisely measured using monetary prices?

The ECA asserts that a socialist economy would be unable rationally to chose between different combinations of factors to arrive at a least cost combination. In answer to the obvious retort that a socialist economy would not concern itself with costs in this monetary form, it might be contended that there will still be a need to reckon costs in some other guise and that it is precisely these substantive costs – or if you like, "real world" costs – that the price mechanism is able faithfully to represent via its pattern of objective exchange ratios. But how could this be proven.? To prove this is the case one would have to demonstrate a precise correlation between these "substantive costs" and their monetary representations. One can determine whether such a correlation exists only by measuring one against the other. But that presents a problem for the ECA since, in doing this, one would have inadvertently shown that costs can indeed be independently measured, and rendered calculable, without recourse to market prices.

This places the proponents of the ECA in a invidious position since failure to demonstrate a putative correlation between these substantive costs and their alleged market representations means that all they have to fall back on is a tautology: that only a market economy is able to perform economic calculations couched in market prices. Steele himself has attempted to circumvent this argument with the (specious) claim that it is "parallel to arguments which have frequently been levelled against general theories. Thus every year or so some new genius discovers that Darwin's theory of natural selection is vacuous, because it says that the fit survive, but there is no way to measure who are fit except by seeing who survive"⁷. But, of course, the analogy is completely inapt; the relationship between "fitness" and "survival" is a causal one which simply does not apply

in this case. What is involved here is nothing quite so grand as a "general theory" but a modest proposition concerning the alleged statistical correlation between two sets of data without causation being invoked in any way.

Finally, if the ECA is really about narrow accounting costs rather than opportunity costs as such then presumably we have a solid basis for testing the proposition that a system of market prices can faithfully calculate the costs incurred in production decisions. Here we are referring to "costs" in their positive sense, not opportunities foregone. It is evident that in this sense, market-based calculations are far from adequate. There is an enormous literature on the problem of externalities and spill-over effects which illustrates this point very well. Suffice to say that in a competitive market economy there will always be an obvious in-built incentive for competing firms to externalise their costs as far as practically possible or to the extent to which they can get away with doing this. Pollution costs are one example of this and typically necessitate some intervention by the state to impose curbs on the offending firm in question in the interests of other firms who may have to indirectly pick up the tab. "Social costs" are another example. A firm may consider it necessary to lay off part of its workforce to reduce its production costs and remain competitive. However, this reduction of its labour costs has costly repercussions for the workers involved and society in general which tend not to be accounted for on the firm's own balance sheet.

Attempts to get round the problem of externalities and spill-over effects through the application of concepts such "willingness-to-pay" (WTP) and "willingness-to-accept" (WTA) are problematic and provide little, if any, comfort for proponents of the ECA. WTP has to do with what people would be prepared to pay to mitigate or avert some undesirable effect while WTA refers to the level of financial compensation they would be willing to receive for having to put up with such an effect. Mainstream economists tend to regard the costs involved in both instances as roughly equivalent but there is considerable evidence based on surveys to suggest that this is simply not the case – not according to people's "subjective evaluations" of environmental losses and gains, at any rate.⁸ In fact, environmental losses tend to be more highly valued than environmental gains even where similar sums of money are involved. There are a number of other problems associated with these techniques (e.g. the tendency to underestimate the value of future resources; the problem of non-use values and option values which are to do with resources that you do not yourself make use of or might only do so at a later date) all of which highlight the shortcomings of market valuations, shortcomings which the ECA tends to gloss over.

C) The problem of "net income"

According to the ECA not only is there a need to discover the least cost combinations of inputs required to produce a given good; there is also a need to ensure that the revenue obtained from the sale of this good is sufficient to cover the cost of producing it. This can only be done by attaching prices to a firm's inputs (A and B in our example) as well as its output (good X).

"Net income" is the difference between a firm's revenue or proceeds and its costs. Positive net income is what is usually referred to as profit; negative net income, as loss. As Mises put it, "Every single step of entrepreneurial activities is subject to scrutiny by monetary calculation. The premeditation of planned action becomes commercial pre-calculation of expected costs and expected proceeds. The retrospective establishment of the outcome of past action becomes accounting profits and losses"⁹.

This statement is revealing. It inadvertently highlights a serious flaw in the ECA. The ability to compute profit and loss is what in theory is supposed to ensure the efficient – that is "profitable" – allocation of resources. But it turns out that it ensures nothing of the sort. Just because a system of market prices affords one a set of figures with which one can perform precise calculations does not

mean that these figures will turn out to be correct – that is to say, will unerringly guide the entrepreneur towards a positive net income.

As Steele puts it: “Since all production decisions are about the future and the future is always uncertain, decision makers have to make guesses, take gambles, play hunches and follow their experienced noses.”¹⁰ and “In the market, entrepreneurs anticipate, speculate, agonise, guess and take risks. They also frequently perform elaborate calculations, aware that the results of such calculations are only as good as their assumptions. Always enveloped in a cloud of ignorance, market decision-makers strain to discern the indefinite contours of the changing shapes that loom ambiguously out of the fog.”¹¹

This seems unambiguous enough but then, curiously, Steele feels prompted to ask: “Does the fact that production is actually guided by estimates of future prices, and not by reading off ‘current’ (recent) prices, destroy the force of the Mises argument? Apparently not, for two reasons: 1. past prices are a guide which helps people to make more accurate (though still fallible) estimates of future prices; and 2. people’s estimates of future prices are eventually confirmed or refuted. There is an objective test of the accuracy of the estimates: profit and loss.”¹²

Steele’s first point rather undercuts his previous claim that production cannot actually be guided by current (recent) prices and he does not quite seem able to make up his mind on how relevant the latter are. By his own admission, entrepreneurs can and often do get things spectacularly wrong when relying on current /recent prices – the energy crisis of the 1970s being a case in point. It is also to be noted that these current/recent prices are a record of accounting costs, not opportunity costs, and so do not shed much light on the opportunities foregone in making a production decision since the latter are a “tacit reference to hypothetical future income”¹³ which can only be guessed at. He admits that entrepreneurs are fallible yet does not seem to see the inconsistency in admitting this and claiming that the price system ensures “exact calculation”.

Steele’s second point – that there is an objective test of the accuracy of entrepreneurial estimates – is presumably the more important one but, even so, holds no water. Remember that what we are looking for is some way of reliably guiding the entrepreneur to make sound production decisions concerning net income in the future – otherwise there would be little point in going on about the need for “exact calculation”. The fact that the market process is retrospectively “self-correcting” in eliminating or bankrupting those firms that err (incur an economic loss) in their future estimates is completely irrelevant. The resource allocations these firms committed themselves to constitute what economists call “sunk costs” and cannot be retrieved once made. Bygones, as the saying goes, are bygones. More importantly, there is no guarantee that those entrepreneurs, having had the good fortune to estimate future prices accurately, will continue to do so. We are emphatically not talking about some selective process at work here which incrementally refines the abilities of entrepreneurs generally to make sound economic judgements which Steele seems to be implying. If this were the case then the history of the market economy would manifest itself as a progressive reduction in uncertainty and risk.

On another matter, when Steele refers to profit and loss as an objective test of the accuracy of estimates of future prices one presumes he is using “profit” here to mean accounting profit or net income. However, this is a little confusing. This is because he also uses the term “profit” in another, more specialised, sense as well. The entrepreneur’s return on her capital, he contends, is called “interest” (or what we would normally called profit) and where this is equal to her accounting profits “there is no profit in the strict economic sense. True profit is a return above interest; loss, a return below interest”¹⁴. The irony is that such profit can only arise where the economy departs from the abstract model of perfect competition and optimal resource allocation. As Lachmann observes “profits are earned whenever there are price-cost differences; they are thus a typical

disequilibrium phenomenon"¹⁵. Thus, according to the free marketeers' own theory of how the market behaves, the very imperfections which they deplore (such as monopolistic tendencies) "are, in fact, key profit-generating dynamics in the economic system. In other words, market imperfections are the main source of profit in the economy"¹⁶. Such profit, as Steele points out, is the result of the entrepreneur outguessing the market and benefiting society in the process. Presumably, such benefits would not be forthcoming in the idealised (and completely unrealistic) competitive model of the free market which free marketeers strive to realise and that what is needed instead is a less competitive model in which price distortions are allowed more free play. But that, of course, undermines an important assumption of the ECA about the need for market forces to be given free rein in order to ensure the "accuracy" of market prices.

According to the ECA, in the absence of market prices that allow entrepreneurs to make profit and loss computations, economic efficiency cannot be assured. This, it is argued, is incompatible with the maintenance of a developed economic infrastructure. However, we have seen just how problematic such profit and loss computations are in the real world despite the evidence of a developed economic infrastructure around us (which the proponents of the ECA themselves delight in pointing out and attributing to the market). This suggests that there must be something seriously awry with the theory itself.

In any event, the claim that a socialist economy would need to be able to calculate "net income" in some sense does not stand up to close scrutiny. The notion of "net income" in fact derives purely from the functional requirement of capitalism to realise profit through market exchange – that is, it is system-specific. Certainly, this requires inputs and outputs to be reduced to a common denominator – to facilitate comparison and thereby ensure that when one commodity is exchanged for another, they are equivalent to each other. Indeed, market transactions necessitate such equivalence. However, it does not follow that this kind of comparison making use of a common denominator would be required in a socialist economy. In such an economy, "economic exchange" of any sort would no longer apply. It would not be necessary to determine whether "more" or "less" wealth in general was being created than was being used up in the production of that wealth for the very simple reason that the concept of wealth "in general", a completely abstract and crudely aggregated notion of wealth, is of no practical use in itself and would be utterly meaningless outside the context of commodity exchange. This emphatically does not mean that a socialist economy will have no way of ensuring that resources would be efficiently allocated (which I will consider later); it simply means that such an economy does not need to operationalise this wholly unsatisfactory notion of "net income" in order to achieve this efficient allocation.

D) Estimating the negative effects of misallocation

Mises was clearly adamant that socialism could not be realised because it lacked any method of rational calculation. The implication of such a claim is that the effect of not having such a method would be so devastating as to prevent socialism from ever being realised. However, as Bryan Caplan points out, this flatly contradicts Mises own opinion that "economic theory gives only qualitative, not quantitative laws"¹⁷. According to Mises in *Human Action* (quoted in Caplan), "economics is not, as ignorant positivists repeat again and again, backward because it is not quantitative. It is not quantitative because there are no constants". But if that is the case, how could you quantify the negative effects of this supposed misallocation in a hypothetical socialist economy and come to the conclusion that they were so severe as to make socialism infeasible?

The Misesian argument would appear to rest on the claim that while there is only a finite number of options concerning the use of inputs that would lead to their efficient allocation, whereas there is an infinity of options that would result in those same inputs being misallocated. The chances are that without the means of making economic calculations, decision-makers in a socialist economy would

chose one of the latter options. As Mises put it, economic calculation “provides a guide amid the bewildering throng of economic possibilities. It enables us to extend judgements of value which apply directly only to consumption goods – or at best to production goods of the lowest order – to all goods of higher orders. Without it, all production by lengthy and roundabout processes would be so many steps in the dark ... And then we have a socialist community which must cross the whole ocean of possible and imaginable economic permutations without the compass of economic calculation”¹⁸.

However, as we shall see later, a socialist economy would be quite capable of avoiding this fate through the institutionalisation of a set of constraints that steer decision makers towards the efficient allocation of resources. In any case, Mises’ claim about the lack of a reliable compass to guide these decision makers might as well be directed at market capitalism. This is what can be inferred from the Theory of The Second Best formulated Richard Lipsey and Kelvin Lancaster in 1956¹⁹. Looking at the “general equilibrium” model of the economy, they argued that in order for equilibrium (pareto optimal allocation) to obtain a number of equilibrium conditions need to be simultaneously satisfied such as the supply of all goods being exactly equal to the demand for them, the output price of goods being equal to marginal cost of producing them and the long term profit for all firms being equal to zero. Where just one of these optimal conditions is not met then the ‘second best’ position can only be reached by departing from all the other Paretian conditions. To put it in a nutshell, any single price distortion leads to all other prices being distorted because of its ramifying consequences for exchange ratios throughout the economy and since price distortions are inevitably going to arise in the market, capitalist decision makers will likewise have to contend with whole ocean of possible and imaginable economic permutations in which their ability to perform precise calculations using market prices will be to little avail. This is because such prices, being distorted as it were, will almost by definition be unable to provide a reliable guide (in terms of price theory). Of course the notion of a “general equilibrium” is merely an abstraction and has no empirical basis in fact. While Mises acknowledged this he did not seem to perceive the devastating consequences that this had for his own theory of “economic calculation”.

The implication of Mises’ argument is that the more scope one allows for the free interplay of market forces the more efficient and reliable the allocation process. Can this claim be empirically tested? It is often argued for example that so-called free market economies perform better than their more interventionist, state capitalist, competitors. But this can be for any number of reasons other than “economic calculation”: differences in natural and labour resource endowments, the prevalence of natural disasters, historical circumstances (e.g. civil conflict), the incentive problem in oppressive regimes (a point that Caplan makes) and economic dependence (a reference to “dependency theory” and the argument that the already developed First World systematically “under-develops” the Third World). There is a further problem of disentangling cause and effect. For example, is it the case that relatively successful economies are successful as a result of implementing free market policies or are those policies themselves the result of economic success? Those economies that are more competitive are likely to be more favourably disposed towards free trade for the obvious reason that they have little to fear from competition, whereas, conversely, less competitive or economically successful economies will tend to want to adopt a more protective and interventionist approach to protect their own interests. Indeed this is what enabled Germany, at the end of the 19th century to overtake Britain in terms of industrial production: Whereas the latter was still relatively laissez-faire in its outlook, Germany and other continental economies at the time relied heavily on tariffs and other interventionist measures to build up their industries.

Empirical support for the economic calculation thesis is thus remarkably weak. In any case, there is not, never has been and never will be such a thing as a strictly “free market” economy in the real world. In the real world, the market necessarily operates closely in tandem with the capitalist state, varying only in the degree to which this happens. As Karl Polanyi has noted: “The road to the free

market was opened up and kept open by an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organised and controlled intervention”²⁰.

E) The costs of economic calculation

What is often overlooked is that accounting, while it might concern itself with cutting costs, is itself a significant cost. This has important implications for the ECA. Parallel to a system of physical accounting (see section 5) what we have today as well is a system of monetary accounting. Monetary accounting is a highly complex process in which all enterprises in a capitalist economy must of necessity engage, even though it plays a supernumerary role as far as the physical process of organising production is concerned. In earlier class-based social formations money played a secondary role in the economic life of society; in modern capitalism, however, its influence is all-pervasive. Its purpose is not to ensure the efficient allocation of resources as such but to expedite market exchanges by providing a universal equivalent against which all other commodities exchange, so enabling the computation of profits and losses by competing actors engaged in these market exchanges. That is why it eventually supplanted the traditional system of barter – because of the obvious structural shortcomings of the latter which impeded market exchanges. For example, you cannot swap your pig for two chickens from your neighbour if he or she already has an ample supply of pigs; paying your neighbour in cash overcomes this problem.

As well as enjoining economic actors to engage in monetary accounting, the development of capitalism gave rise to a whole plethora of institutions and economic activities directly or indirectly concerned with the handling and circulation of money rather than the production of use values as such – for example, banks, insurance companies, pay departments, building societies and so on. Indeed, this already vast and steadily proliferating sector of the economy is a natural outgrowth of the systemic needs of an economic system centred on the competitive accumulation of capital; such institutions and activities arose precisely to service those needs. One might want to argue that a bank, for example, performs a useful role in that it lends money to a factory and thus enables the latter to manufacture useful things that consumers in a market economy may value. Therefore, banks perform no less a useful role than factories in the production of these useful things. But this is to engage in a sleight of hand; it is to overlook the distinction that needs to be made between the specific conditions under which a factory has to operate within a given socio-economic system and the physical process of production itself. It is the former that is precisely being questioned which proponents of the ECA, on the other hand, take wholly for granted and assume is seamlessly linked to the latter. That is to say, they assume what they need to prove: that you cannot operate a modern system of production without market prices (and hence those kind of institutions – like banks – linked with market exchanges in capitalism).

It is the elimination of such activities and institutions, essential though they may be to a functioning market economy but unproductive in themselves from the standpoint of producing use values or meeting human needs, that constitutes perhaps the most important (but by no means only), productive advantage that a socialist economy would have over a capitalist economy. The elimination of this structural waste intrinsic to capitalism will free up a vast amount of labour and materials for socially useful production in socialism. Just how much resources will be made available for socially useful production in this way is a moot point. Most estimates suggest at least a doubling of available resources by comparison with the present.²¹ Yet the proponents of the ECA, while claiming that socialism would sink into the slough of inefficiency and falling output without the guidance of market prices, seem wilfully determined to deny socialism this particular productive advantage that it has over capitalism by positing the necessity for institutions such as banks – or some analogue of banking – in a socialist economy. This is a specious claim; it is unwittingly reading into socialism the functional requirements of capitalism.

4 SOCIALISM AND THE RED HERRING OF CENTRAL PLANNING

One of the sacred cows of the Left is the idea of a "planned economy". This can be quite misleading. Given the Left's traditional hostility towards the "free market", this may convey the impression that the free market is somehow antithetical to "planning". But this is not the case at all. The free market is replete with plans of every kind. The difference is that the interconnections or interrelationships between these myriad plans are unplanned, spontaneous and anarchic.

"Central planning" is the proposal to eliminate altogether this unplanned spontaneity by assimilating these different plans into a single society-wide plan. For free market critics of socialism like Mises and Hayek, it is taken for granted that a socialist economy would be a centrally planned economy in this sense of the term. It is argued that this central direction of economic activity would necessarily go hand in hand with a command structure (what Mises called the "Fuhrer principle") to ensure production targets are met in accordance with the central plan and without any deviations that would threaten the coherency of the plan. The ineluctable consequences that flow from this are that a socialist economy could not be run democratically, that centralised rationing would have to replace free access and that voluntary labour would have to give way to coerced labour. In short, we would no longer be talking about "communism" or "socialism" as these terms were traditionally conceived by individuals like Marx, Engels, Morris and Kropotkin.

It is beyond the scope of this article to consider in detail the problematic nature of this particular notion of "central planning". Suffice to say, it would be logistically impossible to collate together all the dispersed information concerning the supply and demand for every conceivable kind of production good or consumer good throughout the economy. In theory, that would entail constructing a stupendously complicated and labyrinthine input-output matrix to accommodate all this information but, even then, unforeseen changes such as natural disasters or population movements would seriously disrupt the input-output ratios with ramifications that would spread uncontrollably to every other area of the economy. This would necessitate a reformulation of the plan *in toto*. Since change is an endemic fact of life, it follows that the plan would never have the opportunity to be put into effect; it would be constantly confined to the drawing board assuming a big enough drawing board could be found for this purpose. While this does not strictly touch on the ECA as such, it can be seen as a supplementary argument to demonstrate the impossibility of socialism (or communism) as a form of economic organisation. Indeed this explains why critics of socialism so often maintain that the abandonment of a price mechanism could only really work at the level of a "Robinson Crusoe" economy; given the complexity of modern production, it is impossible for any single mind – like Crusoe's – to grasp the totality of the interconnections this entails.

Is the assumption that a communist or socialist economy would entail centralised or society-wide planning a reasonable one to make? It might if it could be shown that is what was being advocated by supporters of such an economy. Steele is unequivocal in thinking this is the case. He cites Marx's and Engels' objections to the anarchy of capitalist production and the allocation of resources "behinds the backs of the producers" as well their advocacy of "conscious social control" and the implementation of a "definite social plan"²². It may seem a reasonable inference from such language that what Marx and Engels had in mind was indeed the kind of society-wide – or central – planning, to which Steele refers.

However, as Steele himself acknowledges, the word "plan" has many shades of meaning²³; it could embody just a set of intentions or it could embrace also the means to execute these intentions. Some of the points that Steele makes flatly contradict his claim that Marx and Engels stood unequivocally

for central planning. Thus, he acknowledges that "Marx sees the communist administration as a federation of self-governing groups largely concerned with their internal affairs and collaborating for the comparatively few purposes that concern all the groups"²⁴. This vision of communism is unquestionably incompatible with Steele's version of "central planning".

The reference to "anarchy of production" is highly misleading and it does seem very much that Steele has got the wrong end of the stick in assuming that Marx and Engels implied by this the desire to replace a situation in which you had a myriad of plans (and the unplanned interconnections between them) with a single society-wide plan where the total pattern of production is planned. On the contrary, it seems more reasonable to assume that by "anarchy of production", Marx and Engels were referring to the blind ungovernable economic laws of capitalism which intercede in human affairs and get in the way of conscious human intentions. Often this phrase is linked in their writings to the capitalist trade cycle which is a particularly apt manifestation of those ungovernable laws. Here you have a perverse situation of "overproduction" alongside increased misery and want. What could better convey the idea of subjective intentions being wilfully denied and flouted by forces operating beyond the control of those very intentions?

Further evidence in support of this interpretation of "anarchy of production" is provided by Engels' claim in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* that anarchy in capitalism grows to a "greater and greater height". This is an allusion to the increasing severity of economic crises he imagined would occur in capitalism. Whether or not he was correct in supposing this is besides the point. Steele maintains that Marx and Engels subscribed to the idea that there was an inherent tendency in capitalism towards centralisation and concentration – in other words a gradual diminution in the area of unplanned spontaneity existing between competing units by virtue of the decline in the number of such units competing in the market. Strictly speaking, this would imply less "anarchy" on Steele's interpretation of the word but as we see in Engels' case, such anarchy is likely to grow to a "greater and greater height". Clearly this directly contradicts Steele's claim that "For Marx, anarchy of production is not an emergent quality of the market. The market does not cause anarchy of production. Anarchy of production causes the market."²⁵

But even if Marx and Engels were advocates of central planning, that does not mean that every socialist or communist must necessarily follow suit. What of those who clearly do not advocate central planning and, indeed, explicitly reject the idea? Insofar as they embrace a vision of a future society which entails a multitude of interacting plans and significant decentralisation, this may be said to conform to Steele's notion of "anarchy of production". The question is, does such anarchy of production necessarily "cause the market" as he provocatively contends?

Steele has little to say on the subject and other attempts to deal with concept of relatively decentralised non-market economy – such as Kevin McFarlane's tract, *Real Socialism wouldn't work either* (*Libertarian Alliance* 1992 Economic notes no.46) have been theoretically slight or plainly misconceived. Such is the grip of central planning on the thinking of free market critics of socialism that they find it difficult to envisage it being organised on any other basis.

As I suggested earlier, this has profound repercussions for the discussion on economic calculation. It is not that the ECA necessarily implies or, in itself, relies on a vision of socialism entailing central planning. However, insofar as supporters of the ECA do hold such a vision, it is precisely this, I will argue, that prevents them from coming to recognise an effective response to the ECA. That is predicated on a solution that necessitates a vision of socialism that, on the contrary, is relatively decentralised and spontaneously ordered. It is to just such a vision that we now finally turn.

5. ANATOMY OF A SOCIALIST ECONOMY

By "socialism" or "communism", as we saw earlier, was traditionally meant a society without markets, money, wage labour or a state. All wealth would be produced on a strictly voluntary basis. Goods and services would be provided directly for self determined need and not for sale on a market; they would be made freely available for individuals to take without requiring these individuals to offer something in direct exchange. The sense of mutual obligations and the realisation of universal interdependency arising from this would profoundly colour people's perceptions and influence their behaviour in such a society. We may thus characterise such a society as being built around a moral economy and a system of generalised reciprocity.

Free access to goods and services is a corollary of socialism's common ownership of the means of production; where you have economic exchange you must logically have private or sectional ownership of those means of production. Free access to goods and services denies to any group or individuals the political leverage with which to dominate others (a feature intrinsic to all private-property or class based systems). This will work to ensure that a socialist society is run on the basis of democratic consensus. Decisions will be made at different levels of organisation: global, regional and local with the bulk of decision-making being made at the local level.²⁶ In this sense, a socialist economy would be a polycentric, not a centrally planned, economy.

Over and above these broad defining features of a socialist economy one can identify a number of derivative or secondary features which interact with each other in coherent fashion and have particular relevance to the question of resource allocation. As with consumption goods, production goods would be freely distributed between production units without economic exchange mediating in this process. We can list these various interlocking secondary features of a socialist economy as follows:

A) Calculation in kind

Calculation in kind entails the counting or measurement of physical quantities of different kinds of factors of production. There is no general unit of accounting involved in this process such as money or labour hours or energy units. In fact, every conceivable kind of economic system has to rely on calculation in kind, including capitalism. Without it, the physical organisation of production (e.g. maintaining inventories) would be literally impossible. But where capitalism relies on monetary accounting as well as calculation in kind, socialism relies solely on the latter. This is one reason why socialism holds a decisive productive advantage over capitalism; by eliminating the need to tie up vast quantities of resources and labour implicated in a system of monetary accounting.

A criticism of calculation in kind is that it does not permit decision makers to compare the total costs of alternative aggregates of bundles of production factors to arrive at a "least cost" combination. This as we saw earlier, is based on a complete misunderstanding. In a socialist economy there will be no need to perform such an operation. However this does not mean that it will not be possible to compare alternative bundles of factors – like methods 1, 2 and 3 in our example – on some other basis and arrive at a decision as to which is the most efficient to use as we shall see later.

Possibly the most prominent advocate of calculation in kind was Otto Neurath. Neurath wrote up a report to the Munich Workers Council in 1919 entitled "Through War Economy to Economy in Kind" which Mises later attacked. In this report, Neurath argued that the Germany's war economy had demonstrated the possibility of dispensing with monetary calculation altogether. However his position at the time was somewhat weakened by virtue of the fact that he also subscribed to a

system of central planning. This made him vulnerable to the Misesian arguments against central planning about the problems of collating the dispersed information of economic actors in an economy. Neurath in later life moved away from a centrally planned conception of socialism and developed instead an "associational conception of socialism" which entailed a "decentralised and participatory account of socialist planning".²⁷

In his debate with Mises, Neurath was scathing in his criticism of the "pseudorationalism" employed by Mises and the mistaken assumption that rational decisions require commensurability of different values²⁸. This, as O'Neill points out, reduced decision making to a "purely technical procedure" which left out "ethical and political judgement" (as we saw in our discussion of externalities). One of the advantages of a system of calculation in kind is that it opens up the possibility of a much more rounded and nuanced approach to decision-making and gives more weight to factors such as environmental concerns often overlooked in market calculations.

B) A self-regulating system of stock control

The problem with a centrally-planned model of socialism is *inter alia* its inability to cope with change. It lacks any kind of feedback mechanism which allows for mutual adjustments between the different actors in such an economy. It is completely inflexible in this regard. A decentralised or polycentric version of socialism, on the other hand, overcomes these difficulties. It facilitates the generation of information concerning the supply and demand for production and consumption goods through the economy via a distributed information (and today, largely computerised) network in a way that was possibly unimaginable when Marx was alive or when Mises first wrote his tract on economic calculation. This information, as we shall see, would play a vital role in the process of efficient resource allocation in a socialist economy.

Stock or inventory control systems employing calculation in kind are, as was suggested earlier, absolutely indispensable to any kind of modern production system. While it is true that they operate within a price environment today, that is not the same thing as saying they need such an environment in order to operate. The key to good stock management is the stock turnover rate – how rapidly stock is removed from the shelves – and the point at which it may need to be re-ordered. This will also be affected by considerations such as lead times – how long it takes for fresh stock to arrive – and the need to anticipate possible changes in demand. These are considerations that do not depend on the existence of a market economy at all. Interestingly, Marx wrote in *Capital* Vol. II of the need for a socialist economy to provide a buffer of stock as a safeguard against fluctuations in demand.

A typical sequence of information flows in a socialist economy might be as follows. Assume a distribution point (shop) stocks a certain consumer good – say, tins of baked beans. From past experience it knows that it will need to re-order approximately 1000 tins from its suppliers at the start of every month or, by the end of the month, supplies will be low. Assume that, for whatever reason, the rate of stock turnover increases sharply to say 2000 tins per month. This will require either more frequent deliveries or, alternatively, larger deliveries. Possibly the capacity of the distribution point may not be large enough to accommodate the extra quantity of tins required in which case it will have to opt for more frequent deliveries. It could also add to its storage capacity but this would probably take a bit more time. In any event, this information will be communicated to its suppliers. These suppliers, in turn, may require additional tin plate (steel sheet coated with tin), to make cans or beans to be processed and this information can similarly be communicated in the form of new orders to suppliers of those items further down the production chain. And so on and so forth. The whole process is, to a large extent, automatic – or self regulating – being driven by dispersed information signals from producers and consumers concerning the supply and demand for goods and, as such, is far removed from the gross caricature of a centrally planned economy.

It may be argued that this overlooks the problem of opportunity costs which lies at the heart of the ECA. For example, if the supplier of baked beans orders more tin plate from the manufacturers of tin plate then that will mean other uses for this material being deprived by that amount. However, it must be born in mind in the first place that the systematic overproduction of goods that Marx talked of – i.e. buffer stock – applies to all goods, consumption goods as well as production goods. So increased demand from one consumer/producer, need not necessarily entail a cut in supply to another – or at least, not immediately. The existence of buffer stocks provides for a period of re-adjustment. This brings us neatly to our second point – namely that this argument overlooks the possibility of there being alternative suppliers of this material or indeed, for that matter, more readily available substitutes for containers (say, plastic). Thirdly, and most importantly, as we shall see, even if we assume a worse case scenario – that we face a stark choice between having more tins of baked beans and less of something else by virtue of diverting supplies of tins to the manufacture of additional tins – there is still a way of arriving at a sensible decision that would ensure the most economically efficient allocation of resources under these constrained circumstances.

C) The Law of the Minimum

The “law of the minimum” was formulated by an agricultural chemist, Justus von Liebig in the 19th century. What it states is that plant growth is controlled not by the total amount of resources available to a plant but by the particular factor that is scarcest. This factor is called the limiting factor. It is only by increasing the supply of the limiting factor in question – say, nitrogen fertiliser or water in an arid environment – that you promote plant growth. This however will inevitably lead to some other factor assuming the role of limiting factor.

Liebig’s Law can be applied equally to the problem of resource allocation in any economy. Indeed Liebig’s dismissal of the claim that it is the total resources available to a plant that controls its growth finds an echo in the socialist dismissal of the claim that we need to compare the “total costs” of alternative bundles of factors. For any given bundle of factors required to produce a given good, one of these will be the limiting factor. That is to say, the output of this good will be restricted by the availability of the factor in question constituting the limiting factor. All things being equal, it makes sense from an economic point of view to economise most on those things that are scarcest and to make greatest use of those things that are abundant. Factors lying in between these two poles can be treated accordingly in relative terms.

To claim that all factors are scarce (because the use of any factor entails an opportunity cost) and, consequently, need to be economised is actually not a very sensible approach to adopt. Effective economisation of resources requires discrimination and selection; you cannot treat every factor equally – that is, as equally scarce – or, if you do, this will result in gross misallocation of resources and economic inefficiency. On what basis should one discriminate between factors? Essentially, the most sensible basis on which to make such a discrimination is the relative availability of different factors and this is precisely what the law of the minimum is all about.

Indeed one can go further. Because a socialist economy would to a large extent be a self-regulating economy involving a considerable degree of feedback and mutual adjustment, it would be driven willy-nilly in the direction of efficient allocation by the kind of constraints alluded to in Liebig’s law of the minimum. These supply constraints will operate inevitably in every sector of the economy and at every point along every production chain. When a particular factor is limited in relation to the multifarious demands placed on it, the only way in which it can be “inefficiently allocated” (although this is ultimately a value judgement) is in choosing “incorrectly” to which particular end use it should be allocated (a point we shall consider shortly). Beyond that, you cannot

misuse or misallocate a resource if it simply isn't available to misallocate (that is, where there are inadequate or no buffer stocks on the shelf, so to speak). Of necessity, one is compelled to seek out a more abundant alternative or substitute (which would be the sensible thing to do in this circumstance).

The relative availability of any factor is determined 1) by the crude supply of this factor vis-à-vis other factors in any aggregate of factors required to produce a given good, as revealed via the self-regulating system of stock control and 2) the technical ratio of all those factors in this aggregate, including our factor in question, required to produce this given good. This ratio tells us how much of each factor is needed which we can then be compared with the supply of each factor in order to arrive at some idea of the relative availability of the factor in question in relation to other factors.

Let's look at how this might work in practice. Let us say one unit of a given good Y can be produced using 3 units of factor M and 2 units of factor N. If there are 6 units of M and 6 units of N then we easily work which of these factors – M or N – is the limiting factor. In this case it is M because if 1 unit of Y can be produced using 3 units of M and there are only 6 units of M it follows that you can only produce 2 units of Y altogether (if you disregard N). On the other hand, if 1 unit of Y can be produced using 2 units of N and there are 6 units of N altogether this would allow us to produce 3 units of Y (if we disregard M). If the total demand for Y was only 2 units or less then we might not have much cause for concern. However if the demand was for more than 2 units of Y we might have to consider ways of increasing the supply of Y, for example by altering the technical mix of inputs so that it requires fewer units of M and more of N. In other words we would be reducing the supply constraints that M exerts in limiting the output of Y. Note that all of this is perfectly feasible without recourse to market prices whatsoever. Note also that it takes cognisance of, and puts into operation, the concept of opportunity costs with which the ECA is ostensibly concerned. Thus, if we decided to divert 4 units of N away from the production of Y to the production of another good – let us call it Z – then we know very well what we have foregone by thus cutting back on the supplies of N needed to produce Y. The 2 units of N that we are left with after the other 4 have been diverted to Z will only suffice for the production of 1 unit of Y. Whereas before we could produce 2 units of Y where M was the limiting factor diverting 4 units of N to Z would mean, in effect, that N would replace M as the limiting factor in producing Y and that the opportunity costs of diverting 4 units of N to Z would amount to the loss of 1 unit of Y.

Slowly but ineluctably we are closing the net around the ECA. It remains for us to identify just one more of socialism's interlocking production features to close the circle completely.

D) A hierarchy of production priorities

In any economy there needs to be some way of prioritising production goals. In capitalism, as we have seen, this is done on the basis of purchasing power. From the standpoint of meeting human needs, however, this can be extraordinarily inefficient. The economist, Arthur Pigou argued in his influential work *Economics of Welfare* that it is "evident that any transference of income between a relatively rich man to a relatively poor man of similar temperament, since it enables more intense wants to be satisfied at the expense of less intense wants, must increase the aggregate sum of satisfactions."²⁹ Pigou's point is that the marginal utility of, say, a dollar to a poor man was worth much more than it was to a rich man. Thus society as a whole would benefit – that is, its total utility would be enhanced – were an income transfer to take place between the latter and the former. The problem is that this kind of income distribution, however much it makes for a palpably inefficient outcome is not only a consequence, but also a functional requirement, of a market economy. Indeed, this is a point which advocates of a free market economy themselves routinely make. Redistribution, they claim, is likely to undermine the very structure of incentives upon which a thriving economy depends.

It is this grossly unequal distribution of income or purchasing power which has become even more glaringly unequal in recent decades at both the national and global levels, which exerts such a profound effect on the whole pattern and composition of production today – and the consequent allocation of resources that underpins this. It is reflected in the kind of production priorities that manifest themselves around us: conspicuous consumption in the midst of the most abject poverty. Such consumption is the cornerstone of a system of status differentiation which, in turn, provides the ideological underpinnings of an accumulative capitalist dynamic. It is from such a dynamic that the myth of insatiable demand springs. The logic of economic competition expresses itself as an economic imperative that enjoins competing enterprises to seek out and stimulate market demand without limit. Increased consumption translates into increased status while, at the same time, conveniently affording those enterprises increased opportunities to realise profit.

As Thorstein Veblen suggested in his work *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1925), within such a status hierarchy in which social esteem is closely related to an individual's "pecuniary strength" it is how those at the top of this hierarchy exercise their pecuniary strength that provides the key signifier of social esteem in this hierarchy. Hence the emphasis is on extravagant luxury which only the rich can really afford. But as Veblen shrewdly observes this does not prevent those lower down this hierarchy from imitating those higher up – even if this means the wasteful diversion of their limited incomes from meeting more pressing needs: "No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, forgoes all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category of consumption are not given up except under stress of the direst necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away."³⁰

The irony is that even a modest redistribution of wealth, if it were possible, would significantly enhance the productive potential of hundreds of millions trapped in the mire of absolute poverty by improving their mental and physical capacities. To put it simply such inequality is not only morally offensive; it is also grossly inefficient.

In a "free access" socialist economy the notion of income or purchasing power would, of course, be devoid of meaning. So too would the notion of status based upon the conspicuous consumption of wealth. Because individuals would stand in equal relation to the means of production and have free access to the resultant goods and services, this would fundamentally alter the basis upon which society's scale of preferences was established. It would make for a much more democratic and consensual approach altogether and enable a system of values reflecting this approach to emerge and shape this agenda. It is perhaps this that really lies behind the notion of society wide planning – some co-ordinated and commonly agreed approach in setting society's priorities.

How might these priorities be determined? Here Maslow's "hierarchy of needs" springs very much to mind as a guide to action. It would seem reasonable to suppose that needs that were most pressing and upon which the satisfaction of others needs were contingent, would take priority over those other needs. We are talking here about our basic physiological needs for food, water, adequate sanitation and housing and so on. This would be reflected in the allocation of resources: high priority end goals would take precedence over low priority end goals where resources common to both are revealed (via the self regulating system of stock control) to be in short supply (that is, where the multifarious demands for such resources exceeds the supply of them). Buick and Crump speculate, not unreasonably, that some kind of "points system" might be used³¹ with which to evaluate a range of different projects facing such a society. This will certainly provide useful information to guide decision makers in resource allocation where choices have to be made between competing end uses. But the precise mechanism(s) to be used is something that will have to be decided upon by a socialist society itself.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that a socialist economy would need to have some system of production priorities and how this might be arrived at. We have seen how this would impact on the allocation of resources where the supply of such resources falls short of the demand for them. We have looked at the mechanism of a self-regulating system of stock control, using calculation in kind, which would enable us to keep track of this supply and demand. We have established that the need to economise on the allocation of resources is positively correlated with their relative scarcity and that that, in turn, is a function not only of crude supply as revealed via the self regulating system of stock control but is also a function of demand and of the technical ratios of inputs involved. Comparison of the relative scarcity of different inputs allows us to operationalise Liebig's law of the minimum. Having identified our limiting factors we can subject them to the guidance of our established system of production priorities to determine how they are to be allocated. In short, what we have finally arrived at is a coherent and functioning system of interlocking parts that at no point has need of economic calculation in the form of market prices whatsoever. What then remains of the Economic Calculation Argument? Based on a highly unrealistic set of assumptions about how a market economy actually operates in practice, it attacks what is clearly a gross caricature of a socialist economy which would be unworkable, in any case, on grounds other than that of economic calculation. In truth, the fortunes of the ECA were inextricably bound up with the rise of state capitalist alternatives to the so-called free market, parading as socialist economies, which were the real targets of its hostility. By that token, the historical relevance of the Misesian argument has disappeared along with the collapse of these self same state capitalist regimes.

Robin Cox lives on the Sierra de la Contraviesa in southern Spain 'trying to be a peasant', and has an interest in environmental matters.

¹ D R Steele, chapter 4 2, *From Marx to Mises: Post-capitalist society and the challenge of economic calculation* (Illinois; Open Court, 1992)

² J O'Neill, Nov/ Dec 1995 "In partial praise of a positivist: the work of Otto Neurath" , *Radical Philosophy* no 74; p.30 3)

³ L von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949), p.679

⁴ J Salerno, 1994 "Reply to Leland B. Yeager on 'Mises and Hayek on Calculation and Knowledge'", *Review of Austrian Economics* 7 (2), pp 111–25.

⁵ Steele, p.11

⁶ Steele, p.10

⁷ D.R.Steele, *Libertarian Student* vol. 3 no 1, [n.d.], p.7

⁸ <http://www.projectcommunis.org/articles/000613.html>

⁹ L von Mises, p. 229

¹⁰ Steele, 1992, p.15

¹¹ Steele, p.169

¹² Steele, p.16

¹³ Steele, p.169

¹⁴ Steele, p.419

¹⁵ L M Lachmann, *Macro-economic thinking and the Market Economy* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs,1973)

¹⁶ D King, *The New Right: Politics, Markets and Citizenship* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p.80

¹⁷ B Caplan, <http://www.gmu.edu/departments/economics/bcaplan/why.aust.htm>

¹⁸ L von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1922), pp. 101, 105

¹⁹ R G Lipsey and K Lancaster, "The General Theory of Second Best", *Review of Economic Studies*, vol. XXIV , Oct 1956 pp.11-32

²⁰ K Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston,1957), p.140

²¹ K Smith K, *Free is Cheaper* (Gloucester: John Ball Press,1988)

²² Steele, p.255-6

²³ Steele, p.256

²⁴ Steele, p.316

²⁵ Steele, p.50

²⁶ *Socialism as a Practical Alternative* (London, SPGB pamphlet, 1994)

²⁷ O' Neill, p.35

²⁸ O'Neill, p. 31

²⁹ quoted in M Lutz & K Lux, *Humanistic Economics: The New Challenge*; (New York: Bootstrap Press, 1988), p.132

³⁰ quoted in M J Lee (ed), *The Consumer Society Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p.39

³¹ A Buick & J Crump, *State Capitalism: the Wages System under New Management* (New York: St Martins Press, 1986), p. 139

Ten Blokes That Failed to Shake the World

Stuart Watkins and Dave Flynn

This article started life as a talk one of us gave to a small group of marxists who meet at Birkbeck College in London. A number of serious criticisms have been made of it, many of which we agree with. However, we stand by the thrust of the argument, and publish here a slightly edited version.

What does it mean to be a communist today? We expect there are many answers to this question, depending on what one understands by the term communism. But where we come from, communists are people who have taken and continue to take a principled stand not just against bourgeois rule and the capitalist system, but also against those who claim to stand for socialism or communism but whose political practice supposedly reveals their ‘leftist’ or ‘bourgeois’ nature. Some have even made the logical leap and contend that the politics of Karl Marx were bourgeois.¹ Our basic contention is that this position is not as radical as it sounds, and is more often than not empty posturing.

Defining exactly what ‘leftism’ is and situating it historically is no easy matter. The term ‘ultra-left’ is equally problematic. But we think we will be well enough understood by the readers of this journal if we say that by the ultra-left we mean all those groups and individuals who use such concepts as ‘the left-wing of capitalism’ to distinguish their practice from that of other socialist and marxist (leftist) parties. Depending on your point of view, this is either the thin red line that distinguishes genuine communism from bourgeois leftism, or ultra-left childishness that refuses to accept a few steps of real movement over the immediate application of the ‘maximum programme’.

Let’s kick off with a quote from the German ultra-leftist Otto Ruhle. In his ‘Basic Issues of Organisation’, he says:

Those who have grown old within the traditional forms of struggle do not reflect that everything in the world is only good and proper in its own time. Once that time is past, what was good becomes bad and what was proper becomes misguided; sense becomes nonsense, merit becomes liability.

Ruhle is attacking leftism from the point of view of communism and revolution at a time when the idea of a working-class revolution didn’t seem mad. We agree with what Ruhle is saying, but in a modern context, perhaps it is ultra-left thinking, which may well have been ‘good and proper’ in its own time, that has become ‘nonsense’, if not actually influential enough to be a ‘liability’.

One of the things that provoked our drift away from the appealing formulas of ultra-leftism was Mark Steel’s book *Reasons to be Cheerful* – a truly excellent political memoir from the point of view of an SWP member, covering a 25-year period from punk to New Labour, taking in the Miner’s Strike, the Anti-Nazi League and the anti Poll Tax struggles. We first read the book as convinced ultra-leftists, whose hatred of the SWP was surpassed only by a hatred of the bourgeois mode of production. But at the end of his book, we were forced to ask, What’s actually wrong with all this? Steel described in some detail what SWP (‘leftist’) activity involves. And, even making allowances for omissions and the one-sided nature of his account, we’re still puzzling. From Steel’s point of view, the purpose of the SWP was to support and help organise struggles and demonstrations and so on, striving to build them into a mass, organised movement, and, at the same time, build support for socialism (and the SWP). There is a tendency, in some of the cruder ultra-left thinking, to portray this work as a conscious effort to derail ‘genuine’, radical, working class struggle, and take it to a safer (bourgeois) terrain. The obvious question here is, if the working class

can be derailed and confused by a force as minuscule as the SWP, then what kind of a force is it anyway?

In another of his books, Mark Steel caricatures the ultra-left response to leftist activity as being like a group, with a national membership of nine, turning up to the storming of the Bastille with leaflets entitled 'Why We Aren't Supporting This Demonstration'. It's the political equivalent of the Harry Enfield character who, in a ludicrous show of one-upmanship and posturing, continually declares himself 'considerably richer than yow'. Our political activity has never amounted to much more than going up to bemused people on demonstrations and handing them a leaflet that says:

This is all very well, and well done. Jolly impressed. But, just to let you know: we are considerably more revolutionary than yow.

Still, it could be worse. We once saw members of the Communist Workers Organisation standing on the side of a demonstration with a loudhailer, shouting, 'No War But The Class War!' at people as they walked past. This was reported in their press in glowing terms, saying they were pleased to see that some elements on the 'bourgeois' demo were at least delivering a clear class message.

But having a pop at the CWO is too easy. Let's turn instead to a key ultra-left figure, Anton Pannekoek. In his 'Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics', he says this:

The source of the recent tactical disagreements [he meant differences within the German SPD, between figures like Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg] is clear to see: under the influence of the modern forms of capitalism, new forms of action have developed in the labour movement, namely mass action. When they first made their appearance, they were welcomed by all marxists and hailed as a sign of revolutionary development, a product of our revolutionary tactics. But as the practical potential of mass action developed, it began to pose new problems; the question of social revolution, hitherto an unattainably distant ultimate goal, now became a live issue for the militant proletariat, and the tremendous difficulties involved became clear to everyone, almost as a matter of personal experience.

Like Ruhle, he is arguing for an ultra-left, anti-reformist, revolutionary position. But he is doing it in the context of a time where, as he puts it, 'new forms of action have developed in the labour movement, namely mass action'. Pannekoek's comments, we would argue, make sense against this background.

Can the same point be made today? Where is the 'mass action' that would make sense of this political position? No one could argue that today we are in a situation where the problem of socialism is a 'live issue', 'clear to everyone ... as a matter of personal experience'.

We are, rather, living through a time where the working class movement is so weak that most people are led to doubt its very existence. A time of despair and irony, where the very idea of social progress sounds hopelessly old fashioned, even dodgy.² The idea of socialist revolution has again retreated, in Pannekoek's words, into the position of an 'unattainably distant ultimate goal', and the question of what it means to be a communist in such times must be addressed realistically. Paul Foot, analysing the activity of Karl Marx, makes a similar point in his book *The Vote*. We can only imagine what harsh words Marx would have for people who demanded 'socialism, and nothing but' whatever the circumstances.

John Sullivan, in his pamphlet 'As Soon As This Pub Closes', asks a similar question, and wonders what, if there is 'no link between immediate struggle and socialist objectives', an individual can do apart from joining the SWP. If there's no mass action, why not join the sect that seems to have most success in agitating for it, whatever your reservations about that sect's particular ideology? Sullivan's answer to this question is attractive. The ultra-left response to leftist sects sometimes amounts to dismissing them as mad, bad and dangerous to know: theoretically clueless, mentally unstable and, well, bourgeois. Sullivan, instead, urges us to understand them in terms of the social conditions that produced them, and concludes that leftist sects, like religion, are the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and that they'll only disappear when the world begins to change.

Should we apply the same thinking to ultra-left sects too? Are they a harmless diversion from the cruelties of capitalism? Perhaps. The ultra-left portrays itself as the unsullied guardian of communist ideas, but these ideas too were products of specific social circumstances, and ultra-leftists understandably cling on to them for solace in a heartless world. Speaking personally, they strike us as a suspiciously neat solution to the contradiction that arises when one is committed to militancy and communism in theory, but lives a relatively comfy middle-class lifestyle in practice. Sometimes, to hang onto the gains of our class and our personal gains as individuals, you need to keep your head down.

But Sullivan's argument still strikes us as too fatalist. He says all this will change when the world begins to change. What do we do in the meantime? Pull up a chair and put the kettle on while we wait for the upturn? As human beings, of course, we need to cling onto our utopian dreams, but, as marxists, we must also carve out a path for practical action in the present. This dialectic between utopia and practical action was summarised nicely by the historian EH Carr in his series of lectures that was published as 'What is History?' Carr said that, in a time of doubt and despair, it is particularly important to set out an understanding of the present AND a vision for the future. Utopia and reality, he said, were two essential facets of political science, and 'sound political thought and sound political life will be found only where both have their place'.

So let's not be too harsh on the ultra-left. Their vision of communism is what has kept us going in politics. What remains to be done, however, is to carve out a sound political life that is about more than reading texts, and nattering, and handing out patronising leaflets.

An important reference point in helping us to think about these questions is Rosa Luxemburg. She is an interesting, perhaps a key, figure in these debates because, almost uniquely, she is claimed by both the left and the ultra-left as 'one of ours'. This very fact should be enough to nail the claim sometimes made that the ultra-left is not a part of the left at all. Some people object to the term 'ultra-left' for this reason. It sullies the ultra-left by connecting it to leftism. Leftism, they argue, is bourgeois nonsense, whereas genuine communist theory and practice is separated from it by a clear – if thin – red line.

We can't make any sense of this claim. It seems clear to us that the ultra-left is both historically and theoretically inextricably connected to the left. Its ideas arose as part of the left. The SPGB in this country, for example – the sect we used to be members of – can be seen as an ultra-left split from British social democracy. The Communist Left clearly came out of Bolshevism and European social democracy. It's certainly true, we think, that both Bolshevism and social democracy degenerated into what the ultra-left now call the 'left-wing of capital'. But this phenomenon, where working class oppositional movements become co-opted as part of a movement for a healthier capitalism, was obvious even in Marx's time, as his analysis of struggles for a shorter working day in *Capital*

makes clear. Recognising the tendency and denouncing it doesn't make it any easier to deal with in practice.

And anyway, if it's true that these working-class movements were co-opted by capital, what of the ultra-left? Far from continuing the good fight as the only remaining true communists, as they portray themselves, we would argue that they were merely left marooned, ineffective and isolated, on the ultra-left of a society increasingly dominated by capital. The ultra-left's main audience and constituency had gone over to the other side. So what remained? The ultra-left simply became a disloyal opposition to leftism, existing in much the same relationship as Trotskyism did to Stalinism – if on a smaller scale. The idea that the objective decline of the left – the collapse of 'Communism', the decline of social democracy – would lead to a rejuvenation of 'genuine' communism, unsullied by leftism, has, so far at least, proved to be a delusion. How could it be otherwise? The death of the dog has also killed off the fleas.

We have, of course, in the meantime, seen the rise of new oppositional movements, such as the anti-capitalist/anti-globalisation movements, the World Social Forum, the anti-war movement, and so on. But the influence of the left does not seem to us to have gone away, despite over-excited claims to the contrary. We think this is fundamentally because the questions that leftism raises have not gone away. They may have been wished away with simplistic formulas by the ultra-left. But they have not been transcended.

To go back to Rosa Luxemburg, you sometimes get the impression from ultra-left groups that her writings on the question of Reform or Revolution gave a simple and satisfying answer, namely, 'Er, revolution, please.' In fact, she argued, in short, that the one was the battleground where the working class was schooled and prepared for the other. In a time when it seems clear that the working class is not organised for reform or for anything else, to carry on with the, 'Er, revolution, please', demand seems a bit bonkers. The reform/revolution problem has not been solved, and is not in danger of being solved any time soon.

Perhaps, in this light, the work carried out by the left doesn't look like such a bad idea after all: struggling, if often in vain, for reforms; engaging in 'consciousness-raising' exercises; organising coalitions against capitalist war; struggling to create a climate where the idea that we can fight back and win doesn't look mad, where we can begin to heal the crisis of social vision, where an alternative to capitalism begins to seem plausible and on the agenda. As Kenan Malik puts it, human beings are conscious agents who realise themselves through projects to transform themselves and the world they live in. And if revolution isn't on the cards, then we'll just have to lower our sights.

To conclude, we think that the ultra-left is like a boxer who takes to the ring and doesn't punch his opponent because he knows that only his big right cross will knock his opponent out. But the opportunity never arises. As anyone who knows anything about boxing could tell you, such a boxer will always lose to the guy who knows the art of the jab, the art of the little dig in the ribs. But worse, to stay with the analogy, imagine a boxer who didn't do any sparring or training, because he thinks his one-punch knockout is so deadly, there's just no need. This boxer, too, will always lose to the man who has sparred and lost, and fought, and lost, and gained the necessary experience to fight. As Carlo Rotella put it in his book *Cut Time*, boxing conducts an 'endless workshop in the teaching and learning of knowledge with consequences'. And the boxing gym, as Loic Wacquant put it in his book, *Body & Soul: Notes of An Apprentice Boxer*, is a 'school of morality ... that is to say, a machinery designed to fabricate the spirit of discipline, group attachment, respect for others as for self, and autonomy of the will that are indispensable to the blossoming of the pugilistic

vocation'. Perhaps we could think of left-wing sects, and organising in the workplace, and the fight for reforms, and the fight against war and fascism, and so on, as being like the boxer's gym. No one's saying this is perfect or The Answer. But no one ever learnt how to swim without getting in the water.

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¹ See John Crump's critique of Marx at http://www.geocities.com/Athens/acropolis/8195/marx_critique.htm

² Actually, we're nowhere near as gloomy about the prospects for radical politics as this makes us sound. But our point is that these prospects are unlikely to seem exciting or worthwhile if you're waiting for a movement that lives up to ultra-leftist expectations.

Syndicalism, Ecology and Feminism: Judi Bari's Vision

Jeff Shantz

According to the late Wobbly organizer and Earth Firster, Judi Bari, a truly biocentric perspective must really challenge the system of industrial capitalism which is founded upon the 'ownership' of the earth. Industrial capitalism cannot be reformed since it is founded upon the destruction of nature. The profit drive of capitalism insists that more be taken out than is put back (be it labour or land). Bari extended the Marxist discussion of surplus value to include the elements of nature. She argued that a portion of the profit derived from any capitalist product results from the unilateral (under)valuing, by capital, of resources extracted from nature.

Because of her analysis of the rootedness of ecological destruction in capitalist relations Bari turned her attentions to the everyday activities of working people. Workers would be a potentially crucial ally of environmentalists, she realized, but such an alliance could only come about if environmentalists were willing to educate themselves about workplace concerns. Bari held no naïve notions of workers as privileged historical agents. She simply stressed her belief that for ecology to confront capitalist relations effectively and in a non-authoritarian manner requires the active participation of workers. Likewise, if workers were to assist environmentalists it was reasonable to accept some mutual aid in return from ecology activists.

In her view the power which manifests itself as resource extraction in the countryside manifests itself as racism and exploitation in the city. An effective radical ecology movement (one which could begin to be considered revolutionary) must organize among poor and working people. Only through workers' control of production and distribution can the machinery of ecological destruction be shut down.

Ecological crises become possible only within the context of social relations which engender a weakening of people's capacities to fight an organized defence of the planet's ecological communities. Bari understood that the restriction of participation in decision-making processes within ordered hierarchies, prerequisite to accumulation, has been a crucial impediment to ecological organizing¹. This convinced her that radical ecology must now include demands for workers' control and a decentralization of industries in ways which are harmonious with nature. It also meant rejecting ecological moralizing and developing some sensitivity to workers' anxieties and concerns.

To critics this emphasis on the concerns of workers and the need to overcome capitalist social relations signified a turn towards workerist analysis which, in their view, undermined her ecology. Criticisms of workers and 'leftist ecology' have come not only from deep ecologists, as discussed above, but from social ecologists, such as Murray Bookchin and Janet Biehl, who otherwise oppose deep ecology. Social ecology guru Bookchin has been especially hostile to any idea of the workplace as an important site of social and political activity or of workers as significant radical actors. Bookchin repeats recent talk about the disappearance of the working class², although he is confused about whether the working class is 'numerically diminishing' or just 'being integrated'. Bookchin sees the 'counterculture' (roughly the new social movements like ecology) as a new privileged social actor, and in place of workers turns to a populist 'the people' and the ascendancy of community. Underlying Bookchin's critique of labour organizing, however, is a low opinion of workers which he views contemptuously as 'mere objects' without any active presence within communities³.

Lack of class analysis likewise leads Janet Biehl to turn to a vague 'community life' when seeking the way out of ecological destruction⁴. Unfortunately communities are themselves intersected with

myriad cross-cutting and conflicting class interests which, as Bari showed, cannot be dismissed or wished away. Notions of community are often the very weapon wielded by timber companies against environmentalist 'outsiders.'

Biehl recognizes the ecological necessity of eliminating capitalism but her work writes workers out of this process. This is directly expressed in her strategy for confronting capital: 'Fighting large economic entities that operate even on the international level requires large numbers of municipalities to work together'⁵. Not specific social actors – workers – with specific contributions to make, but statist political apparatuses – municipalities. To confront 'macrosocial forces like capitalism ... [Biehl proposes] ... political communities'⁶. All of this is rather strange coming from someone who professes to be an anarchist.

Biehl even states that the 'one arena that can seriously challenge' current hierarchies is 'participatory democratic politics' but makes no reference to the specificity of the workplace in this regard⁷. Yet, within capitalist relations, the workplace is one of the crucial realms requiring the extension of just such a politics. And that extension is not likely to occur without the active participation of people in their specific roles as workers. Bari, concerned with encouraging this participation, did not have the luxury of overlooking the everyday concerns of workers.

As a longtime feminist and unionist Judi Bari was well aware of tendencies within the labour movement, and the left generally, to treat concerns of gender or environment as subordinate to the larger movement or worse as distractions. Bari was no vulgar materialist given to economic analyses, however, and she rejected Dave Foreman's characterization of Local 1 as simply 'leftists' or a 'class struggle group'. She too remained sharply critical of Marxist socialism and what she saw as its acceptance of the domination of nature.

We are not trying to overthrow capitalism for the benefit of the proletariat. In fact, the society we envision is not spoken to in any leftist theory that I've ever heard of. Those theories deal only with how to redistribute the spoils of exploiting the Earth to benefit a different class of humans. We need to build a society that is not based on the exploitation of Earth at all — a society whose goal is to achieve a stable state with nature for the benefit of all species.⁸

For inspiration Bari turned to non-authoritarian traditions of socialism. Specifically, her materialism took the form of syndicalism – revolutionary libertarian unionism⁹. Bari developed her green syndicalist approach as an attempt to think through the forms of organization by which workers could address ecological concerns in practice and in ways which broke down the multiple hierarchies of mainstream trade unionism. She recognized in syndicalist structures and practices certain instructive similarities with the contemporary movements for ecology and radical feminism.

Historically anarcho-syndicalists and revolutionary unionists fought for the abolition of divisions between workers based upon, for example, gender, race, nationality, skill, employment status and workplace. Revolutionary unions, such as the IWW, in fighting for 'One Big Union' of all working people (whether or not they were actually working) argued for the equality of workers and the recognition of their unity as workers while realizing that workers' different experiences of exploitation made such organization difficult.

Like radical feminists, anarcho-syndicalists have argued for the consistency of means and ends. Thus syndicalists organize in non-hierarchical, decentralized and federated structures which are vastly different from the bureaucratic structures of mainstream trades unions which have been largely resistant to participation by women. The alternative organizations of anarcho-syndicalism are built upon participation, mutual aid and cooperation. Anarcho-syndicalism combines the

syndicalist fight against capitalist structures and practices of exploitation with the anarchist attack on power and awareness that all forms of oppression must be overcome in any struggle for liberty. The IWW has long fought for the recognition of women as 'fellow workers' deserving economic and physical independence (i.e. self-determination) and access to social roles based upon interests and preferences¹⁰.

Regarding the affinity between anarcho-syndicalist organization and 'second wave' feminist practice Peggy Kornegger¹¹ has commented: 'The structure of women's groups bore a striking resemblance to that of anarchist affinity groups within anarchosyndicalist unions in Spain, France, and many other countries.' Kornegger laments that feminists did not more fully explore the syndicalist traditions for activist insights.

Besides, as Purchase argues, industrial unions 'are composed of people – feminists, peace activists and ecologists included – and are simply a means by which people can come to organise their trade or industry in a spirit of equality, peace and co-operation.'¹² The exclusion of workers from new social movements discussions is both arbitrary and inaccurate.

Exactly what sense we are to make of such sweeping dismissals of centuries of sustained resistance to the encroachments of capital and state by ordinary working people is quite unclear. Besides, in the absence of state-supported industrial [or green] capitalism, trades unions and workers' co-operatives – be they bakers, grocers, coach builders, postal workers or tram drivers – would seem to be a quite natural, indeed logical and rational way of enabling ordinary working people to coordinate the economic and industrial life of their city, for the benefit of themselves rather than for the state or a handful of capitalist barons, and it is simply dishonest of Bookchin to claim that anarchism has emphasised the historical destiny of the industrial proletariat at the expense of community and free city life.¹³

The concerns raised by Foreman, Bookchin and Biehl are well taken. Indeed, much Old Left thinking, of various stripes, did fail to appreciate the causes or consequences of ecological damage. However, as Graham Purchase has pointed out, the reasons for this are largely historically specific rather than inherent.¹⁴ The ecological insights of social ecologists like Bookchin (e.g. ecological regionalism, and green technologies) are not incompatible with syndicalist concerns with organizing workers.

Bari asked how it could be that there were neighbourhood movements targeting the disposal of toxic wastes but no workers' movement to stop the production of toxics. She argued that only when workers are in a position to refuse to engage in destructive practices or produce destructive goods could any realistic hope for lasting ecological change emerge. The only way to bring the system to a standstill is through mass-scale non-cooperation, what an earlier generation of syndicalists knew as the 'General Strike.' Bari's vision for Earth First! combined a radicalization of the group's initial ideas of biocentrism and an extension of the decentralized, non-hierarchical, federative organization, the nascent syndicalist structure of EF!, into communities and workplaces.

While agreeing with the old guard of Earth First! that efforts should be given to preserving or re-establishing wilderness areas, Bari saw that piecemeal set-asides were not sufficient. The only way to preserve wilderness was to transform social relations. This meant that Earth First! had to be transformed from a conservation movement to a social movement. Earth First! needed to encourage and support alternative lifestyles. To speak of wilderness decontextualized the destruction of nature.

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¹ Judi Bari, *Timber Wars* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1994)

² Murray Bookchin, 'Deep Ecology, Anarchosyndicalism and the Future of Anarchist Thought' in *Deep Ecology and Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1997), p.57

³ Bookchin goes so far as to claim that the 'authentic locus' of anarchism is 'the municipality.' This is a rather self-serving claim given that Bookchin has staked much of his reputation on building a 'libertarian municipalist' tendency within anarchism. It also runs counter to almost all of anarchist history. (Bookchin, 1997, p.51) (See Bookchin, 1990)

⁴ Janet Biehl, *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991), p.134

⁵ Biehl, p.152

⁶ Biehl, p.152

⁷ Biehl, p.151

⁸ Bari, 1994, p.57

⁹ For a detailed discussion of green syndicalist theory see Shantz (1999).

¹⁰ As Purchase (1997, p.32) awkwardly overstates:

'Moreover the IWW ... was the first union to call for equal pay and conditions for women and actively sought to set up unions for prostitutes – and in doing so achieved far more for the feminist cause than any amount of theorising about the evolution of patriarchy could ever hope to have done.'

¹¹ Peggy Kornegger, 'Anarchism: The Feminist Connection.' in *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*, ed. by Howard J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996), p.161

¹² Graham Purchase, 'Social Ecology, Anarchism and Trades Unionism.' In *Deep Ecology and Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1997), p.28

¹³ Purchase, p.28

¹⁴ Purchase, p.25

The Dialectic of the New Feminist Movements

Jim Davis, Ozark Bioregion, USA

1

For as long as the patriarchal mode of domination of people based on sex prevails, there will be an ongoing unrelenting struggle for women's liberation. At times this struggle will be out in the open, but more often it is hidden within the domain of family politics. During times of great social, economic and political crises this struggle erupts to the forefront to challenge all ideologies which oppress women. But every time this movement has arisen it has been put back down by the forces of the patriarchy: orthodox religions, the state, artificial notions of family structure and the sexual division of labor. These methods of domination have been successful so far mainly because opposition movements have not come up with methods that would overthrow these oppressive forces. And if women are to succeed in the next round of struggle then these powers of domination must be actively and directly opposed.

2

The overthrow of the patriarchy is just one of the struggles against Capital. It has been said that all Socialists must be feminists but that most feminists are not Socialists. This is sadly true and it is for this reason that modern feminism lacks the imagination necessary to confront and overthrow Capital. This is a most unfortunate contradiction which has to be dialectically transcended. If Capital is not directly opposed and struggled against then all human liberation becomes instead the liberation of Capital from traditional fetters. And the liberation of Capital from all restraint is an ever increasing nightmare world that only spells the New Dark Age. This New Dark Age may have already started.

3

Feminism is an essential element in the struggle of human beings against the domination of Capital. However, not all feminist movements are alike or historically continuous. It is this lack of real continuity between the old feminist movement and the present one that leads the new movement to repeat the errors of the past. This is a direct result of the different origins behind the past and present movements. The present movement owes its origin to the internalized contradictions felt by female participants in the civil rights struggle of the sixties. Their initial theory was limited in being a reaction to their positions within the civil rights and anti-war movements. Doing all of the essential work of movement building, which is the active raising of community to struggle, they were assigned to the very bottom ranks by their male 'comrades' who saw the 'Revolution' as another form of macho-ism. The movement arising out of the society it claimed to be reforming ended up mirroring it. Therefore, women needed to break away in order to resolve the conflict between the movements' claimed goals and actual practice. It raised up a critique of everyday personal life which became the focus of the struggle.

4

It was at this point that the new feminism started to look about, and dug up the past for ideological support. It seized upon the ideas of the past without questioning the reason for the old movement's demise. In doing so, the feminist movement drifted from the real human world into that of the Idea, and like all movements based upon thought fragmented into competing sects. And then another conflict arose, this time drawn up according to economic class, as one section of the movement sought liberation by accommodation with Capital by accepting its ideas and becoming Capital (living beings that are under the control of the dead as Capital is the rule of dead labor). In other words, they sought to become part of the managerial ruling class. The rest of the feminist movement were absorbed into various leftist parties or moved into the realm of the absurd like lesbian separatism, goddess worshippers, Firestone's mechanical sexless utopia, etc. So what started out as

a potentially liberatory movement derailed itself. It avoided the issue of class and increasingly resorted to a false male/female opposition to explain oppression. I feel what is needed now is not the formation of a new feminist movement, rather we should incorporate all of its valid points into a larger movement for human social liberation.

5

What remains of the feminist movements of the 60s and early 70s have become part of the problem. This feminist movement has become recuperated into the capitalist system of domination; it has accepted its role to play. It is the way forward for certain middle-class women and it is the bogey woman for the New Right, thus it performs two functions. These feminists thought they could be social revolutionaries, but the revolution they sought was sold out by them. They accepted a few crumbs from the table of Capital and sold out all humankind. Not willing to face up to the issues of class war, they turned to biology. They sought to explain women's social oppression upon the accidents of birth. Turning more and more to their own self-interests they wrote off half of all humankind as potential allies. They failed to see that the struggle for women's liberation is a part of the larger struggle for human liberation from all Dominion.

6

The contradictions between the reality of everyday life and Western ideology came to a head in the 1960s as various oppressed groupings realized that their oppression contradicted ideology concerning freedom and equality. The very visible oppression of African-Americans within the U.S. social structure and their struggle against it, provided the catalyst for other struggles. These oppressed peoples realized that the special oppression they were personally experiencing was an essential part of the capitalist mode of domination, exploitation, and consumption. This realization forced many of them into ever increasing anti-capitalist positions and the most radical of these groups began to advocate the social revolution.

7

However, Capital has the ability to recuperate any opposition movement which does not call into question the very existence of Capital itself. Capital offers the false hope of a way out of oppression, but only for individuals. If one only played by the mystic rules of the marketplace then you can transcend sex, race and caste. These persons then become spectacular individuals who are then paraded about as proof that differences amongst Americans do not really exist and that group struggle for liberation is unnecessary. Thus group liberation is impossible as long as Capital itself is not struggled against.

8

The feminist movement is divided into two mutually opposed camps: one which is reactionary and the other potentially liberatory. It is only potentially liberatory in that it presents a partial critique of everyday life. It failed historically since it did not raise a critique of the totality of everyday life. And when they attempted to turn theory into practice they suffered from a lack of vision. They placed too much trust in technological solutions and faith in the very institutions which oppressed them. Overall, this is not a long term or unsolvable problem and by no means just a feminist problem. The whole range of social revolutionary movements are similarly infected. This can be summed up by a simple observation: all social revolutionaries too often try to seek a single solution for problems which have multiple causes. Capital is not the cause of our social ills, rather it is the long result of centuries of exploitation which takes a variety of forms; it has numerous origins and numerous ends. To overcome it we need to ride the waves of history but not become too attached to a particular wave; struggles come and struggles go, only the struggle in general goes on.

9

Patriarchy is a pre-capitalist mode of domination whose origins have been lost in the mists of pre-history. It exists in many forms, in all cultures, in all lands and across all known economic systems. The goddess worshipping matriarchy of the feminists is a myth. Modern cultures which worship the goddess oppress women even more than male God religions, so worshipping a goddess is not a sign of non-oppression. What this means is that the patriarchy does not need Capital for its survival and the mere overthrow of the regime of dead labor will not end it. Patriarchal modes of domination can only be overthrown when they are consciously exposed and dismantled. This is not a task for after the revolution. It must take place in the here and now. We must settle in for the long haul and live in our daily lives the future we wish to create. There can be no social revolution without the liberation of women.

10

The most radical of these new feminists eventually decided to declare their innocence by tossing all of the flame for the continuance of the patriarchy upon the backs of existing men. Even when shown that women play an essential role in the reproduction of patriarchal forms of domination within the family (due to their primary role in the early socialization of children) they still refuse to accept responsibility. These would-be social revolutionaries seek only an easy way out, to avoid the painful tasks of reorganizing their everyday social lives. It is far easier to be a victim and go on placing blame than actively to seek out and make reality with practical solutions. The plain truth of the matter is this: all existing men and women equally are oppressed by the structure of domination we inherited from our parents and cannot be held accountable for the sins of our fathers and mothers. However, this does not mean I justify present forms of oppression which we have a chance to struggle against and overthrow. I feel we must struggle against all systems of domination. And the responsibility to do this lies with us all; men and women must unite against Power. One way to do this is to end patriarchal socialization and to abolish all sexual divisions of labor in our everyday lives. We must not pass onto a new generation the domination we detest. Therefore we must form unity towards the development of a new humanity which grows out of our present struggle for freedom.

11

The various left parties and groups all seem to offer the same quick solutions to the problems confronting women. All of their solutions are based upon their seizure of power and of the use of state power to overcome oppression. One solution often advanced to the problem of domestic oppression is the nationalization of housework. This is done through the setting up of communal kitchens, house cleaning services and day-care centres. What this solution completely ignores is the latent sexual division of labor. Since the largest section of the adult population without paid work is women, who do you think will run these nationalized services? Women! So under the leftist scheme women are freed from individual domestic labor only to be subjected to industrialized domestic labor. Therefore liberation becomes a mere sham, a spectacular trick played upon women by their would-be liberators. What is needed is not the nationalization of domestic labor, but the communalization of it. This means that all domestic labor is shared equally by all members of society. In the commune of the future all would participate equally in the maintenance of the commune, preparation of meals, and of the caring for its children (even those without children would participate).

12

Another solution advanced by leftists is to advocate equal pay for equal work or comparable work. Leftists here do not even question the oppression of women as workers, but merely call into question the rate of pay. These leftists are so dominated by the modernist world view that it limits their vision and prevents them from ever transcending the present form of capitalist economy. Thus they say it is alright to exploit as long as all are exploited equally. How far is this from the historic

socialist project of abolition of the wage system! At a time when trade unions were advancing the slogan of 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work', the revolutionary movement was demanding the abolition of the wage system. The problem with capitalism is not just a question of the amount of one's paycheck; we need to abolish capitalism and not meekly beg for a pay raise.

Women cannot achieve liberation as long as they remain domestic slaves. Under the present economic situation women are doubly oppressed both at home and in the workplace. This situation needs to be transcended; the sexual division of labor has to be overthrown. Unless this is done, liberation is impossible. So far all leftist solutions rest upon the maintenance of society as it is and not upon the future we wish to create. While the exact forms of the future social family can only be known in outline, we can still try consciously to eliminate the sexual division of labor within our everyday lives. We should strive to make our lives as prefigurative of our vision as is possible while living in the old world order.

Who will do the Dirty Work?

Tony Gibson

EVERYONE who speaks on the subject of anarchism meets the ever-recurring question, 'But in a social condition of anarchy, who will clean out the sewers?' There are variants of the question; sometimes the enquiry concerns those who will do the hardest work or the dirtiest work, but generally the sewers are mentioned specifically. It would seem that everyone wants to be sure that he will not have to work in the sewers in a free society. Perhaps the capitalist and authoritarian status quo derives the apathetic support it does conditional on the fact that only a tiny fraction of the working-class are economically forced to work in the sewers. I have had no contact with sewer-workers myself; perhaps, not having had the usual bogey before them, they are unafraid of the coming social revolution, for, after all, they work in the sewers, anyway.

I have for many years evaded this haunting question when speaking to public audiences, for I am convinced that the real motive that prompts it must be left to the psychoanalysts, who could tell us quite a lot about the basis of this sewer-dread in the unconscious mind. I feel that sense of embarrassment that we all feel when we are in danger of unearthing someone else's pet neurosis. However, I am now prepared to treat the question, in print, as though it were a rational one.

Before considering who, in fact, will clean out the sewers and do other work that is generally considered 'dirty', in a free society, let us first consider who does it now. Let us also enquire into the nature of 'dirty work'. The people who are now concerned with 'dirty work' are sewer-cleaners, dustmen, surgeons, housewives, slaughter-house men, hospital nurses, lawyers, soldiers, farmers, politicians, tannery workers, gutter-journalists, etc., etc. The first main distinction we may make is between those who can wash off the dirt of their trade at the end of the day's work, and those who cannot. Dirty work is not to everyone's taste. The smells of the sewer or tannery would revolt some people; others would be revolted by the things a surgeon, nurse or slaughter-house man does; others would prefer to do either of these things than touch the filth that lies in the province of the lawyer, politician and gutter-journalist. Our tastes vary.

What is notable about these different occupations is that some are highly paid and some poorly paid. This makes a great difference in our money-conscious society, but perhaps the social prestige attached to the job carries even more weight with many people. A great number of men would rather slave away at an underpaid clerking job with no hope of advancement than undertake the healthier and better paid work of dock-worker. Many girls will work ten hours a day toting bed-pans and dressing wounds rather than take work as a bar-maid. The question of pay and of the 'dirtiness' of the work does not always override considerations of social esteem (often called snobbery).

For a short while I happened to be cleaning the streets of Cardiff for my living; while attending an intellectual gathering a lady asked me what my work was. I told her. Perhaps she was right in thinking that I wished to be rude to her by telling her the truth. Had I wished to play up to the occasion and avoid paining her, I would have vaguely replied that I worked in an important occupation for the benefit of the municipality.

I have read with interest of the shift of social prestige connected with work in the newly organized state of Israel. There, owing to the peculiar nature of the immigrants, there is a huge surplus of professional men. Lawyers, doctors, professors, architects, etc., are far too numerous and there is no living to be made by the majority of them, but bricklayers, navvies, agricultural workers, etc., are in huge demand. Manual work therefore commands a high wage, and the professional men are taking

to it, but the important shift of emphasis is that now jobs that make your hands dirty are socially approved in Israel, in contrast to the social contempt in which such work is held in other capitalist countries. No doubt if capitalism persists in Israel the situation will deteriorate to match other countries, but while it lasts it is an interesting exposition of how a social attitude can quickly change towards 'dirty work'.

It has been pointed out time and again that in a sanely organized society there would be no problem of work which is intrinsically dirty, revolting and degrading to the average man. Such things as garbage collection, sewage disposal, rag picking, furnace stoking, etc., are unpleasant operations in contemporary society only because the men employed in them have not the power to alter their conditions of work. If there were not powerless and exploited beings who must accept filthy and unpleasant conditions of work, as there are to-day, these operations would have priority for the best scientific research and technical skill to be applied to them to make them not merely acceptable as occupations, but congenial. For the key to social harmony lies in the relation of human beings to their work. I would define a free society (that is a healthy society) as one in which there is no social coercion compelling the individual to work.

This definition of anarchy may call forth considerable protest from some anarchists, but I mean it in its most literal sense. Superficially, such an idea seems completely unrealistic, and to be dismissed out of hand as foolish idealism by those who have some experience of life. Let me disassociate myself from all idealism. I have had practical experience of idealists who had such faith in and love of 'Man' that they would let themselves be exploited by work-shy layabouts rather than face the fact that they were supporting parasites to no good purpose. But I also want to make it clear that there is no freedom, nor stability, nor health in any community of people, large or small, where the socially necessary work is carried out merely from a sense of social duty which is imposed upon the individual. The only justification for work is the fact that we enjoy it. Any society which relies upon political, economic or moral coercion as the mainspring of its productive process is doomed to unhealth and some form of servitude.

Work may be defined as the expenditure of energy in a productive process, as distinct from play which is the expenditure of energy without productive result. Work is characteristic of the healthy adult being, play of the healthy child whose energies are occupied in developing his own capacities. Significantly enough, the play of the children of humans, and of other mammals, is generally a rehearsal of adult work-activities.

It is generally realized that work is a necessity for every adult. Those people who have no economic need to work, by reason of their wealth, have to seek work-substitutes to preserve their mental and physical health. They remain, as it were, permanent children, playing at fishing, hunting, sailing boats, gardening and farming, and often find satisfaction in quite strenuous work-play. The lower mammals are no different from humans; they need to work when they are adult. Being less troubled by intellectual doubt, they pursue their occupations with wholehearted satisfaction. In studying creatures simpler than ourselves there can be no doubt as to what gives them pleasure: the otter likes to fish, the beaver to build dams, the squirrel to collect nuts, the rabbit to burrow. Some people may point to their domestic Pussy, 'corrupted by a thousand years of unnatural living', who prefers to lap milk by the fireside than to hunt mice in the cellar, and draw the analogy that modern man is an unnatural animal and needs to be kicked before he will work. In this common analogy there is a biological fallacy. Neither Pussy, nor you, nor I, is a thousand years old: we are not instinctually conditioned by the experiences of our ancestors. We have a certain instinctual endowment which is pretty much the same as when our species first originated, and our behaviour is conditioned by the environment we encounter in our own life span. Turn pampered Pussy loose in the woods and she will revert to a natural feline way of life; remove the pressure of neurotic 20th century civilization

from you and me and we will have the chance of reverting to a natural human way of life which, I contend, includes as spontaneous a wish for and enjoyment of work as the way of life of any other animal species. At present, many of the civilized varieties of our species appear to be unique in the animal kingdom in that their productive process expresses no joy of life. The position is even worse than this: we take it for granted that all animals enjoy the procreative process, but among many of our species even this function has lost its pleasure.

Do we have to look further for the roots of all the social disharmony and individual misery of our time? With us, work is generally regarded as a regrettable necessity, an activity to be endured only for the sake of the material goods produced, or rather for the wage packet which bears no obvious relationship to the work done. The best that the reformers, social planners and even social revolutionaries can suggest is that we may make the working day shorter and shorter, so that there will be less pain (work) and more pleasure (idleness) in our lives. I have even heard an anarchist meeting discussing whether in the great and glorious by-and-by we should have to do three hours work a day or three hours work a week. This is strictly comparable to the following extract from an American sex-instruction manual:

‘Question. How long does the penis have to stay in the vagina? Answer. Only a few minutes.’ Another regrettable necessity!

I do not care if in a social state of anarchy we work a great deal longer than we do today under capitalism. What I am concerned about is that the work itself shall be intrinsically satisfying. I see no other way of ensuring this than the abandonment of coercion as the mainspring of production.

It is obvious that if the wages-system, which is the chief coercive force compelling men to work at their present jobs to-day, were to break down, the following situation would arise. A large number of people would be liberated but disorientated and they would immediately take the attitude of, ‘From now on it’s spiv and live for me – only mugs work!’ This is to be expected. Domesticated Pussy when first turned loose in the woods looks around for another house to sponge off; she does not immediately take on a natural feline way of life. It is this situation that most social revolutionaries are afraid of, and they seek to set up authoritarian machinery to substitute political coercion for the economic coercion of capitalism. It is true that political coercion is not always easy to apply to the productive processes; under Lenin’s dictatorship it was largely abandoned for the economic coercion of the N.E.P. However, if coercion is still resorted to after the breakdown of capitalism in order that men will still work, the ‘spiv and live’ attitude will be preserved as a permanent social attitude.

The problem is not one of ‘faith’ in human nature, it is one of understanding. Either one realizes that human beings are social animals with basically sound animal instincts for self-preservation, or one does not. Those who do not realize the potential animal health of their own kind are generally idealists who have some idealized concept of Man, and take it for granted that Tom, Dick and Harry must be bludgeoned into working, eating, sleeping, bedding with their wives, and cleaning their teeth in the approved manner or they will die from lack of knowing what Man should be. Tom, Dick and Harry are not always pretty creatures, but they are generally better social specimens than the do-gooders, the dangerous fools who would accept the responsibility for organizing their lives for them.

It is my purpose to draw particular attention to the anti-social nature of conscientious administrators. We all know about the harmful nature of conscious exploiters and racketeers under so-called laissez-faire capitalism, but it is the prophets of planned economy and super-government who are the harbingers of famine, war and desolation for the future.

If through a revolutionary breakdown of capitalist society, the compulsion to go to the accustomed place of wage-slavery is no longer operative, then the disorientated people will have the chance to turn to production for use to satisfy their own needs for work. It is usually assumed that the great problem is what ulterior incentives or compulsions to work must be instituted to satisfy the demands of the consumers. We tend to forget that it is as natural for men to produce as to consume. In any society where the producers of wealth are not subject to coercion, the demands of the consumers must follow what it is the nature of that society to produce, every adult being both producer and consumer. That this is hard for many people to realize, I know, for we are accustomed to think of there being a class of 'workers' in society, whose function it is to do as they are told. If the 'consumers' demand televisions, battleships, Coca-Cola and coal, then the 'workers' have no say in the matter: they must produce them. It is time we tried to conceive a society without the coercion of worker by consumer, for as long as we have this picture engraved on our minds it is impossible to think in terms of practical anarchy.

Anarchist writers have dealt at length with the fact that only a very small percentage of the people in this country are really producing anything useful or performing any socially useful function whatever, in spite of the vast degree of unpleasant activity around us. A gross dislocation of our industry would not therefore be a calamity at all. We need a breakdown of the present industrial system; we need revolution and real anarchy in which to reorganize our productive processes with workers in control of their work and motivated by their own need to work, instead of their need of a pay-packet.

The worst calamity that can take place after the breakdown of capitalism is the replacement of economic coercion by political coercion. We are already experiencing the thin edge of the wedge. Those workers who are no longer on the economic border of destitution sometimes choose to stay away from work. As the economic bludgeon fails to intimidate them, the State has recourse to the political bludgeon, and criminal proceedings are taken. How else would you coerce men to work? Either, the individual must be free to go to work or stay away, and Society can lump it, or Society must preserve its coercive machinery, the State. Anarchism is based on the recognition of the fact that, in freedom, men will choose to work.

'But surely some workers, the workers concerned with essential services – cleaning the sewers for instance – must be made to carry out their work, even under anarchy!'

Will you go down and clean out those sewers for the sake of Society, Madam? No? Then, Madam, you may have to use the yard. Or perhaps you will find that many people are less squeamish than you, and will take delight, yes delight, in tackling difficult projects, and they will take more interest in disposing of your sewage efficiently, hygienically and usefully than you do yourself. They may even send it back to you in the form of properly grown vegetables.

(Reprinted from the pamphlet with the full title 'But Mr Speaker, in an anarchist society – "Who will do the dirty work?"' Published by Freedom Press in 1952.)

from <http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/blackchip/dirtywork.htm> (Richard Alexander/MalFunction)

Really Anti-Social

bristle Collective

With all the hoo-ha about anti-social behaviour and handy new catch-all laws for every occasion, politicians are falling over themselves to slap the ‘anti-social’ tag onto anything they don’t like the look of. By taking advantage of people’s real fears and concerns, and sustaining a climate of suspicion through the mass media, they coerce people into arguing for more social control and law enforcement. The definition of ‘anti-social’ used by the authorities is a predictably narrow one, and one pretty much confined (unsurprisingly) to working class communities.

So who decides what is meant by ‘anti-social’? Shouldn’t we first agree on what is ‘social’? Here’s a common dictionary definition of the word: “*social* – living in companies or organised communities ... interdependent, co-operative ... concerned with the mutual relations of human beings” (good grief – that sounds like anarchy to us!). Maybe it’s time for us to join in the finger-wagging but point the finger in the other direction, and come up with some ideas of our own about what we think is anti-social.

Anti-social?	Really anti-social
Gangs of trouble-making youth on the streets	Illegal wars, invasions, and the murder of civilians. Armed forces recruitment staff targeting poor areas, offering what seems like the only way out. Loss of public space – sold off to private companies for ‘development.’ Corporate takeover of our cities, bringing more social control. Slashed public funding for youth and community facilities. Criminalisation of young people
Street drinking	Gentrification and social exclusion. Overpriced pubs and clubs, encouraging binge drinking, alco-pop culture, and subsequent dependency. People suffering isolation, alcoholism and mental health problems as a result of insecure dead-end jobs and alienated, hopeless lives
Begging	Corporate greed and tax evasion. Massive wealth inequality. Pay rises for the rich, tax rises for the poor. Council corruption and huge payouts to consultancy firms ripping off taxpayer’s money. No affordable housing but plenty of luxury homes, as local people get priced out. Benefit cuts, and claimants treated like criminals as part of the ongoing clampdown on welfare. New anti-begging laws to punish people for being too visible about their poverty.
Flyposting and graffiti	Huge advertising companies dominating our lives and communities with billboards and adverts on every bit of space. The cosy relationship between big business and the Bristol City council. Destructive mass consumerism fuelled by the advertising industry
“Problem” families	The Royal family and other hereditary parasites. Families forced into shit housing on left-for-dead estates. The desperation of poverty which makes people go mad. A society based on profit not people. The destruction of community strength, and divisions and conflicts fostered by the mass media, government and capitalism as a whole. Sexism and the continued exploitation of women. Attacks on asylum seekers, and

	institutional racism
Street crime, muggings etc.	Big business tax fraud. Taxes - the constant theft on a grand scale of our hard earned wages to fund wars, social, control and parasitic government. Attacks on other countries to steal their land and resources. 'Get rich quick' selfish mentality and the constant need for more, more, more which the system going. Paranoia, fear and mutual suspicion brought on by years of too much propaganda, news and TV. Poverty and cheap dugs which make people turn communities against each other. Government involvement in the drugs trade. Third world debt

The list goes on why not send us your nominations for any ruling class ne'er-do-wells in need of a good stiff Anti Social Behaviour Order? Answers on the back of a *bristle* subscription form, please!

This article first appeared in bristle magazine, an alternative publication for Bristol and the South West of the UK which aims to provide a space and information for local groups and activists. More information including subscription details is available at www.bristle.org.uk

Marx, Imperialism, and the Question of Capitalist Progress

Michael Handelman

When it comes to the question of how progressive is capitalism, Marx is profoundly ambivalent. The traditional interpretation is that, while Marx views capitalism as an extraordinary brutal system, it also represents a ‘higher stage’ in the development towards socialism. Avineri succinctly summarizes this interpretation when he writes:

... [Marx] is careful not to mistake a condemnation of the social evils inherent in capitalism for a romantic search after the idyllic preindustrial times. It is true that capitalism is the most brutalizing and dehumanizing economic system history has ever known; after all, there have been few critiques of capitalism more outspoken than Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *Das Kapital*. Yet to Marx, capitalism is still a necessary step toward final salvation, since only capitalism can create the economic and technological infrastructure that will enable society to allow for the free development of every member according to his capacities.¹

However, in this essay I will suggest that the traditional interpretation is problematic, both because it takes Marx’s thought as monolithic and internally consistent, and because it tends to downplay the shift in Marx’s thought from the 1840s and 1850s to the 1860s and 1870s. The first section of this paper will discuss the prevalence of social evolutionary concepts in the 19th century, and how these ideas must have colored Marx’s view of the world. The next two sections will utilize a case study approach – I will look at Marx’s views on imperialism and the related idea of how he viewed the impact that capitalism would have on the periphery. I’ve chosen these topics, because I think they best illuminate Marx’s views on capitalist progress – if capitalism is ‘progressive’ then capitalist imperialism and the imposition of capitalism on the periphery, while it may be destructive does serve progressive purposes: it helps bring countries into a higher stage of development, creating the material conditions for socialism in these places².

I will discuss Marx’s early views on the subject by looking at how he viewed India, and then Marx’s later views on imperialism and progressivity of capitalism in relation to Ireland and Russia. In conclusion, I will attempt to relate Marx’s views of the progressive nature of capitalism with that of later marxists.

1. SETTING THE STAGE: SOCIAL EVOLUTION IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The idea that we progress from a ‘lower stage’ to progressively higher stages in terms of our structure is referred to as social evolution. While the concept of social evolution is not new, the 19th century was the heyday of such a concept. Many of the most well-known social thinkers of the day – Sainte-Simon Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Henry Lewis Morgan and others – embraced a notion of social evolution³.

Further accentuating the belief in social evolution, was the revolution in science, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, which explained processes of biological evolution. Many of the social theorists in question took ideas from the natural sciences, and then they committed the naturalistic fallacy of suggesting that because there existed biological evolution, it must mean the existence of social evolution. Herbert Spencer in particular, coined the term ‘Social Darwinism’ to describe the application of Darwinian principles to society.

Living in this environment it would be hard not to be affected by ideas of social evolution. There is evidence to suggest that Marx was strongly influenced by such ideas:

In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels describe several stages of ownership forms – tribal, ancient, feudal, and capitalist. [T]he Preface [mentions] progressive epochs. That Marx and Engels had viewed society as developing in stages is further suggested by their enthusiastic reception of Lewis Henry Morgan’s *Ancient Society* and by Engels’ heavy reliance on that work in his *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.⁴

Perhaps most tellingly Engels in his funeral oration: “Just as Darwin discovered the law of evolution in organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of evolution in history.....”⁵

However, without denying there are social evolutionary elements within Marx’s thoughts, one can derive another interpretation from other passages. Marx, for example, writes that “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”⁶ – this suggests something extremely important, Marx is not giving agency to something that doesn’t have any agency (history). Another passage further illuminates this point:

History does nothing; it does not possess immense riches, it does not fight battles. It is men, real, living, who do all this. ... It is not ‘history’ which uses men as a means of achieving – as if it were an individual person – its own ends. History is nothing but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends.⁷

In contrast, social evolutionists tended to see history as having ‘objective laws’ that lie totally outside human agency (i.e. ‘history just progresses’). Georg Lukacs would later refer to the giving of agency to an abstraction like history, as reification⁸.

Thus, for Marx, it’s not that capitalism was progressive, based on some sort of ‘historical laws’ of social development (as the bourgeois social theorists thought); rather, it was because Marx believed that capitalism would create a revolutionary class (the revolutionary working class) who would bring about the negation of capitalism (socialism/communism). He thought that forcing people into the factories would make workers realize their collective class interests in opposition to the capitalists, and they in turn would become the agents of revolutionary social change (to socialism/communism). If capitalism doesn’t fulfil this function, then for Marx, capitalism is not progressive. In the 19th century, with the emergence of a fairly militant and radical working class, Marx’s conclusion seemed reasonable because he saw the emergence of a revolutionary working class. But if Marx had seen how the progress of capitalism in the 20th century resulted in the working class’s growing mystification (‘repressive consciousness’⁹), he would have seriously doubted the progressive nature of capitalism (and in fact, as we shall see, even Marx started to doubt the progressive nature of capitalism in the 1860s and especially the 1870s). Marx, by emphasizing the role of agency in the creation of human history keeps the door open for the possibility that capitalism will NOT create its own gravediggers, and thus would instead degenerate into greater and greater barbarism without getting any closer to socialism/communism. In fact, this is what so many marxists in the 20th century suggest: just such an phenomenon (eg Luxembourge, Lukacs, Korsch, Reich, Adorno, Camatte etc).

2. MARX, IMPERIALISM AND THE *NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE*

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindostan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social

state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was unconscious tool of history in bringing about the revolution.¹⁰

England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.¹¹

Much of Marx's views on imperialism and the non-European world was material published in the *New York Daily Tribune* (including the above). In many respects, it is often these views that underline arguments that stress Marx's belief in the inherent progressive nature of capitalism¹². While, later on I will discuss the importance of social context, for now it is important to attempt to investigate how Marx viewed the 'Orient' and how this colored his writings.

Marx certainly has a strong element of Eurocentrism in him (Perelman 1989). He had trouble understanding non-European societies, because they didn't fit into the modes of production he saw in Europe. So he developed another type of mode of production to describe all of Asia – the 'Asiatic Mode of Production' (ASM)¹³. It is quite curious that he would use such a term, because the other modes of production (ancient, feudal, modern bourgeois) are analytical and historical, while the ASM is a geographic term. But this stems from how he perceived Asia, he saw Asian society as static¹⁴ and unchanging¹⁵ and endogenously despotic¹⁶. For the early Marx, the productive forces didn't develop endogenously; rather, it was up to exogenous forces like British imperialism to develop these productive forces which in turn would create an industrial working class creating the material conditions for socialist transformation¹⁷.

However, it is important to recognize the context for Marx's writings on imperialism¹⁸. He wasn't writing deep theoretical pieces. Rather he was writing newspaper articles for the general public, and thus there is a tendency for him to simplify complex ideas so they are easily digestible to the general public. But more importantly, he was engaging in a polemical debate with another writer for the *New York Daily Tribune*, Henry Carey.

Henry Carey was an American economist, whom Marx wasn't particularly fond of.¹⁹ Carey was a supporter of protectionism, and had a strong belief that Britain was the reason for American economic problems and the cause behind why there was 'disharmony' (i.e. class conflict) keeping the United States economy 'down'. Carey didn't like the classical economists because they tended to suggest the existence of class conflict (eg Ricardo)²⁰ and he believed that the capitalist economic development could occur without such class conflict.

He and Marx were battling for ideological control of the NYHT, and thus Marx's writings should be seen in this light. Marx was writing not to elucidate his views, but rather to undermine Carey's influence at the NYHT and its readership. "In this respect they (the articles on India) may reflect Marx's views on Carey rather than on India."²¹

In fact, there is textual evidence even from his writings on India that while the dominant tendency in the early Marx's thought was that capitalism was a necessary evil for progress, there is also a contradictory tendency developing within Marx's thought that suggest something rather opposite.

England pays now, in fact, the penalty for her protracted misrule of that vast Indian Empire. The two main obstacles she has now to grapple with in her attempts at supplanting American cotton by Indian cotton are the want of means of communication and transport throughout India, and the miserable state of the Indian peasant, disabling him from

improving favourable circumstances. Both these difficulties the English have themselves to thank for.²²

However, I think Perelman overstates his case: there are quite a few other passages, not in the NYHT, which also tend to suggest the early Marx predominantly believed capitalist imperialism was a necessary evil for progress:

(1) the well known paragraph of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) in which he likens the cheap prices of British commodities to heavy artillery battering down the Chinese walls, and emphasize that the British bourgeoisie creates a world after its own image; ... (3) in numerous passages of the *Grundrisse* written in 1857-1858.”²³

Nonetheless, the fact that so much of the attempt to ‘re-construct’ Marx’s ‘progressivist’ view of capitalism simply on the basis upon the NYHT articles (eg Avineri 1968) should be qualified for both the reason that it was under a certain specific social context, and that Marx’s thoughts on capitalist progress became more nuanced as his thought developed.

3. THE POST-1860S MARX’S VIEW OF IMPERIALISM IN IRELAND AND THE RUSSIAN QUESTION

It is interesting to note that Marx’s early views on the progressive nature of imperialism in India are well-known, yet the later Marx’s views on imperialism are relatively unknown, even by many marxists²⁴. However, to a certain extent this is understandable, because much of Marx’s later writings on imperialism was not in the form of formal journalistic articles but in more informal pieces (letters, drafts, etc.), many of which were not discovered until the 20th century.

Kenzo Mohri has looked at Marx’s views on British imperialism in Ireland, and this suggests that Marx was developing a much more negative attitude towards capitalist imperialism in the periphery. For example, Marx wrote:

Since 1846 the oppression, although it has become less barbaric in form, has been annihilating in substance, and there are no alternatives to voluntary emancipation of Ireland by England or the life-or-death struggle.²⁵

Marx prefigures Dependency Theory by suggesting capitalism, far from promoting the progressive development of the means of production, is rather promoting the “development of underdevelopment”²⁶:

Every time Ireland was just about to develop herself industrially, she was ‘smashed down’ and forced back; into a mere agricultural country ... Ireland was compelled to contribute cheap labor power and capital for the establishment of the ‘great factory of Britain’.²⁷

Thus it is fair to say that Marx became more critical about the inherent progressive nature of capitalist imperialism and capitalism more generally, in the 1860s.

But perhaps even more dramatic was his changed attitude towards Russia in the 1870s. Marx’s NYHT writings on Russia are not complimentary in the 1850s (probably some of this dislike stemmed from the fact that Carey was a Russophile²⁸). But, in the 1870s, Marx started to become more interested in Russia (and the Russian Peasant communes in particular) and was increasingly convinced that capitalism would, far from being an engine of progress for Russia, be antagonistic to real progress there. Shanin offers four reasons for this shift in Marx’s thinking:

The Paris Commune of 1871 offered a dramatic lesson and a type of revolutionary rule never known before. The very appearance of the ‘dawn of the great social revolution which will forever free mankind from the class-split society’ had altered the terms of establishment of a socialist society and set a new contemporaneous timetable to it. It also provided the final crescendo to Marx’s activities in the First International which ended in 1872, to be followed by a period of reflection. Second a major breakthrough within the social sciences occurred during the 1860s and 1870s – the discovery of prehistory which ‘was to lengthen the notion of historical time by some tens of thousands of years, and to bring primitive societies within the circle of historical study by combining the study of material remains with of ethnography’. The captivating impact of those developments on the general understanding of human society was considerable, centring as it did on ‘men’s ideas and ideals of community’ – then as now the very core of European social philosophy. Third, and linked with the studies of pre-history, was the extension of knowledge of the rural non-capitalist societies enmeshed in a capitalist world, especially the works of Maine, Firs and others on India. Finally Russia and the Russians offered to Marx a potent combination of all of the above: rich evidence concerning rural communes (archaic yet evidently alive in a world of capitalist triumphs) and of direct revolutionary experience, all encompassed by the theory and practice of Russian revolutionary populism.²⁹

We see a very sharp change in his attitude prior to the 1870s. Marx held a rather low view of the ancient peasant communes, suggesting capitalism’s destruction of these communes was progressive, for very much the same reason that he saw capitalist imperialism as positive for India³⁰. In the 1870s, he increasingly saw the peasant communes in Russia, not as an anachronism, but rather as prefiguring the *Geimenweisin* or material human community.³¹

It is possible to speculate that Marx was starting to recognize that the cultural and social characteristics that capitalism engendered on people would make the transition to socialism more difficult, rather than easier. Capitalism, by promoting competition, rugged individualism, etc, would make it harder for people to realize their essentially communal natures. It is easier to move from a parochial and provincial communal society to a cosmopolitan communal society achieve than to move from a society which promoted atomization and competition (capitalism) to a communal society.³²

Marx’s 1870s work on Russia illustrates quite a few shifts within Marx’s thoughts towards a far more negative attitude towards capitalism – rejecting the idea that capitalism is progress even in the sense of a ‘destructive but a necessary stage’. Conversely, Marx’s views on peasants become much more positive, often tending to see them as a ‘revolutionary agent’ as opposed to seeing them as fairly reactionary, as in his earlier work:

If Russia continues along the road which it has followed since 1861 (capitalist development), it will forego the finest opportunity that history has ever placed before a nation and will undergo all the fateful misfortune of capitalist development.³³

If the revolution occurs in time, if it concentrates all its forces ... to insure the free flower of the rural commune, then the latter will develop itself before long as an element in the regeneration of Russian society, as a point of advantage when compared to the nations enslaved by the capitalist system.³⁴

The only Possible answer to this question at the present time is the following: If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two can

supplement each other, then present Russian communal land ownership can serve as a point of departure for a communist development.³⁵

However, we can still locate passages in the late Marx to suggest that he continued to hold to the idea that capitalism was ‘necessary evil’ on the road to socialism. In the 1872 edition of *Capital*, this passage remained:

The ancient social organisms, of production (in the ‘modes of production of ancient Asia, of antiquity’ etc.) are extraordinarily much simpler and more transparent than the bourgeois (mode). But they are based either on the immaturity of the individual human who has not yet severed his umbilical chord connecting him with others in a natural community (of a primitive tribe), or the direct relations of lordship and bondage. They are conditioned by a low level of development of the productive powers of labour and correspondingly the narrowness of the relations of human beings as between themselves and with nature in the process of production of material life.³⁶

Thus, even through we see a shift in Marx’s thought in the 1860s and 1870s away from social evolutionist ideas, he didn’t fully abandon these ideas either. He becomes more sceptical of the inherent progressiveness of capitalism, but he doesn’t totally repudiate the idea as well.

CONCLUSION: MARX AND THE MARXISTS

It has often been thought and written that communism would blossom after the destruction of the capitalist mode of production, which would be undermined by such contradictions that its end would be inevitable. But numerous events of this century have unfortunately brought other possibilities into view : the return to "barbarism," as analyzed by R. Luxemburg and the entire left wing of the German workers' movement, by Adorno and the Frankfurt School; the destruction of the human species, as is evident to each and all today; finally a state of stagnation in which the capitalist mode of production survives by adapting itself to a degenerated humanity which lacks the power to destroy it. In order to understand the failure of a future that was thought inevitable, we must take into account the domestication of human beings implemented by all class societies and mainly by capital, and we must analyze the autonomization of capital.³⁷

“No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb.” (Theodor Adorno)

As we saw from the last section, Marx became more pessimistic and negative about capitalist development. He increasingly saw capitalism as being antagonistic to real progress. Twentieth century marxists have increasingly emphasized the negative dimensions to capitalism; and with good reason too: the horrors of the twentieth century brutality and the failure of capitalism to create a revolutionary working class made marxists much more sceptical about the inherent progressiveness of capitalism³⁸.

The marxism that became institutionalized in the Second International (and later the Bolsheviks) had a far more positive view of capitalism than Marx’s writings. They tended to adopt a very determinist reading of capitalist development (and totally ignoring the question of class consciousness). They saw capitalism as progressive and predestined to break down by its own logic and that is when a socialist revolution would occur. But until that breakdown were to occur, capitalism must be seen as progressive because it develops the productive forces.³⁹ Unlike Marx,

they had no appreciation of, for example, the progressive potential of the Russian peasant communes; an oversight that led to tragic results in the Soviet era.⁴⁰

The basic assumptions that undergirded their positivism and their stageism, is far more reminiscent of a pre-Hegelian materialism (what Marx would describe as ‘vulgar materialism’) than Marx’s work. Amadeo Bordiga was quite correct to see the ‘marxism’ of the Second International was in fact merely the ideology of capitalist development⁴¹. In other words, the Second International’s ‘marxism’ was in fact the ideological expression of an effort to complete the capitalist revolution in Central and Eastern Europe⁴².

It would be absurd of course, to suggest that there is no basis for the Second International and the Bolshevik’s ‘marxism’ in Marx’s thought, because as I suggested before, Marx was still trying to wrestle free from the dominant bourgeois ideologies of his day⁴³.

The horrors of WWI forced many marxists to challenge the basic assumptions of economic determinists who called themselves ‘marxists’, and in the process helped rediscover some of Marx’s insights. For many of these ‘rebellious’ marxists, they wanted to understand why WWI happened. How could WWI with all its barbarism, be seen as a product of a progressive system? Why did the working class, instead of making a social revolution against an obviously decadent capitalism, instead take part in killing their fellow workers? For Rosa Luxemburg, that the working class had to choose between socialism or barbarism⁴⁴ – it was not a matter of ‘social evolution’ it was a matter of what the working class deciding what type of society they wanted. For Georg Lukacs, the progress of capitalism was not synonymous with the progress of a revolutionary working-class consciousness, because, far from producing such consciousness, capitalism produced greater levels of mystification (false consciousness or reification) among the working class – thus suggesting that capitalism was antagonistic to the development of socialism/communism⁴⁵. For Wilhelm Reich, the progress of capitalism entailed the progress of psychological disfigurement. This disfigurement would create working class subjects who were attracted not to the workers movement and socialism, but rather to authoritarian politics culminating in fascism.

In all these cases we see an increasing interest in questions of subjectivity. One of the reasons why (especially the young) Marx believed capitalism was progressive was because it created a revolutionary working class which would serve to negate capitalism. Seeing the horrors of WWI, Luxemburg, Lukacs, and Reich and others, were not so sure. But they in a similar manner to the late Marx, still retained the somewhat schizophrenic and contradictory view that capitalism was historically progressive. For example, in that same pamphlet in which Luxemburg writes about the choice between socialism and barbarism, she also writes:

Bourgeois class domination is undoubtedly an historical necessity, but, so too, the rising of the working class against it. Capital is an historical necessity, but, so too, its grave digger, the socialist proletariat.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, their view of capitalist progress is much more qualified than the Second International, the Bolsheviks and possibly even Marx himself (or at least the early Marx).

After the Holocaust, quite a few marxists became even more negative to the question of capitalist progress. For example, many of the members of the Frankfurt School (especially Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse) saw Auschwitz as the inevitable outcome of ‘capitalist progress’. The Adorno quote that started this section, is a succinct description of the overall outlook of many member of the Frankfurt School.

During the Cold War, they further developed their critique of ‘capitalism as progress’ with their analysis of how the development of the Culture Industries (a by-product of capitalist development) served to weaken rather than strengthen the possibility of revolutionary social change because of how the Culture Industries colonize the minds of the oppressed. The retreat into barbarism for Adorno and Horkheimer (and to a lesser extent Marcuse⁴⁷) was a much more likely scenario than moving towards socialism/communism.⁴⁸

It is ironic that ‘neo-marxists’ (e.g. the Frankfurt School) believed they were rebelling against Marx’s overly positive views of capitalist progress, when in fact their analyses were prefigured in his mature work. While, it is the Orthodox or Fundamentalist Marxists who claim they are ‘returning to Marx’, are rather returning to the vulgarized marxism of the Second International.

At any rate, Marx’s views on the ‘progress’ that capitalism has wrought is incredibly ambivalent, and contradictory – as this essay has demonstrated, he often disagreed with himself. The most important contradiction within Marx’s oeuvre has been shown by Jacques Camatte – the technological advances that capitalism has engendered allows us to overcome technical barriers to a world revolution⁴⁹. But at the same time, the development that capitalism brings means greater and greater “repressive consciousness” among the working class. The paradox is that the impact of the capitalist development on subjectivity moves it further and further away from socialism, just as capitalism’s technical development increases the technological possibility of a global socialist revolution. It is this paradox, that Marx and the more creative marxists seem to have sensed, with their seemingly contradictory attitude towards capitalist progress.

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¹ Avineri, 1968, p.3

² "The adoption of the idea of Progress (shared by very few nowadays) implies also the endorsement of such 'progressive' conclusions as the [Orthodox] Marxist one about the 'progressive' role of colonialism[18]" (Fotopoulos and Gezerlis 2002)

³ Zeitlin, 1996

⁴ Zeitlin, 1996

⁵ Engels cited in Zeitlin, 1996

⁶ Marx, 1848

⁷ Marx 1845, Ch 6

⁸ Lukacs, 1971, orig. 1923

⁹ Camatte, 1973

¹⁰ Karl Marx, 'The British Rule in India'

¹¹ Karl Marx, 'The Future Results of British Rule in India'

¹² eg Warren, 1980; Avineri 1968

¹³ Avineri, 1968

¹⁴ "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive invaders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society." (Marx, 1968, orig. 1853)

"Marx saw such societies as perpetuating natural vegetative existence', i.e. Showing cyclical and quantitative changes while lacking an inbuilt mechanism of necessary social transformation." (Shanin 1984: 5)

¹⁵ It is important to recognize that Marx and Engels abandoned the concept of Asiatic Mode of Production in the late 1850s (The *Grundrisse* was the last time they used the term, see *Encyclopedia of Marxism* 'Asiatic Mode of Production')! This is very important, because it indicates that Marx and Engels had begun to abandon Eurocentric notions, they started to realize the essential plurality (and non-static) nature of non-European societies and not conceive of them in such a monolithic and unchanging way. The reason for this, may have stemmed from the fact, that Marx's extensive research on Russia (who he had previously classified as 'semi-Asiatic', see Shanin 1984), perhaps convinced him, that the idea of Asiatic Mode of Production was very faulty)

¹⁶ For example, Marx used ‘Oriental Despotism’ synonymously with ASM.

¹⁷ The Althusserian, Robert Paul Resch, articulates this best when he writes :

“In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels rejected the possibility of ‘socialism in one country’. They understood that no economic system can outproduce capitalism because no conceivable system of coercion is capable of extorting as much surplus value from its workers or more effectively compelling its ruling class to expand and innovate. No social system, in short, is more ‘totalitarian’ than capitalism. Understanding the nature of capitalism, Marx and Engels understood that communism as a ‘local event’ – that is, socialism in one country – would be destroyed by its relative backwardness, by its ‘limiting effect on the universalization’ of the ‘intolerable powers of capital.’ The possibility of communism presupposes the development of capitalism as a global system whose class structure is truly international and homogeneous. Capitalism is a global process whereby ‘separate individuals ... with the broadening of their activity into world-historical activity, become more and more enslaved under a power alien to them ... a power which has become more and more enormous and, in the last instance, turns out to be the world market.” (Marx and Engels 1978, 163).

“If capitalism is indeed a world-historical force and its development global rather than national, then its transformation must also be understood globally rather than nationally. Capitalism will disintegrate only when it has become general, when the ‘universal development of productive forces ... produces in all nations simultaneously the phenomenon of the ‘propertyless’ mass (universal competition) [and] makes each nation dependent on the revolutions of the others.” (Marx and Engels 1978, 161-62). The contradictions of capitalism – the elimination of real scarcity by creating artificial scarcity, the integration and interdependence of social production by reproducing class inequalities of wealth and power, the development of productive technology by producing crises, dislocation, and suffering – become progressively more irrational and intolerable as capitalism eliminates its rivals and begins to collapse in on itself in an orgy of ‘creative destruction’ whose only real purpose will be the restoration of profitability for the ruling class. However, until it has subsumed completely every aspect of social existence in every region of global space, capitalism will always appear progressive and will always be able to resolve temporarily its contradictions by expansion as well as destruction.” (Resch 1992: Introductory Conclusion)

¹⁸ 6. As Karl Korsch puts it so eloquently:

“With Marx and Engels, as indeed with most writers on the field of social, historical, political thought, books have not only a history of their own, but those histories of books – their times and conditions of birth, their addressees, their very titles and their further adventures in new editions, translations, etc. – form an inseparable part of the history of the theories themselves. It is therefore, a deplorable fact that hitherto not only the bourgeois critics of the so-called ‘Marxian contradictions’ but even the most faithful adherents to Marx’s materialistic science should have quoted his diverse theoretical statements without reference to time, addressees, and other historical indices necessary for their materialistic interpretations.” (Korsch, 1964, orig. 1938, p.12)

¹⁹ “H.C. Carey, the only American economist of importance, is a striking proof that civil society in the United States is as yet by no means mature enough to provide a clear and comprehensible picture of the class struggle.” (Marx in Perelman, 1987)

²⁰ “He attacks Ricardo, the most classic representative of the bourgeoisie and the most stoical adversary of the proletariat as a man whose works are an arsenal for anarchists, Socialists and all enemies of the bourgeois system. He reproaches not only him but Malthus, Mill, Say, Torrens, Wakefield, McCulloch, Senior, Whately, R. Jones, and others, the leading economists of Europe, with rendering society asunder and preparing civil war because they show that the economic bases of the different classes are bound to give rise to a necessary and ever growing antagonism among them. He tried to refute them ... by attempting to show that economic conditions: rent (landed property), profit (capital) and wages (wage labour), instead of being conditions of struggle and antagonism, are rather conditions of associations and harmony. All he proves, of course is that he taking the ‘underdeveloped’ conditions of the United States for ‘normal conditions’.” (Marx cited in Perelman 1987, p.14)

²¹ Perelman, 1987

²² Marx cited in Sayer and Corrigan, 1984, p.81

²³ Mohri, 2000, orig. 1989, p.136

²⁴ Mohri, 1989

²⁵ Marx, 1867 cited in Mohri, 1989, p.138

²⁶ This is very interesting because many Dependency theorists have criticized Marx for adopting a unilinear and progressive understanding of capitalism in the peripheries. For example, “Whatever its speed and whatever its zigzags, the general direction of the historical movement seems to have been the same for the backward echelons as for the forward contingents.” (Baran cited in Mohri, 1989, p.134)

²⁷ Marx cited in Mohri, 1989, p.138

²⁸ Perelman, 1987

²⁹ Shanin, 1987, p.6

³⁰ “In a letter to Engels he was clearly delighted with ‘all that trash’, i.e. The Russian peasant communal structure ‘coming now to its end’” (Shanin, 1984)

³¹ Goldner, 1991 – this is perhaps the best introduction to the little known Italian left-communist Amadeo Bordiga in the English language.

³² Shanin, 1984; Wada, 1984

³³ Marx cited in Wada, 1984

³⁴ Marx cited in Wada, 1984

³⁵ Marx and Engels cited in Wada, 1984

³⁶ Marx cited in Chattopadhyay, 2003

³⁷ Jacques Camatte, ‘Decline of the Capitalist Mode of Production or Decline of Humanity?’, 1973

³⁸ This is not to deny the existence of marxists who continue to hold to the idea that capitalist development is a necessary stage to get to socialism. I’ve already mentioned a few of them throughout my essay, (i.e. Bill Warren, Robert Paul Resch). However, these figures are in a minority among Marxists. Alan Lipietz perhaps best captures my feelings to arguments associated with Warren and Resch – ‘Marx or Rostow?’ (Lipietz, 1982)

³⁹ Aufheben, 1993

⁴⁰ “In the battle between Lenin and the Populists in the 1890’s, the battle to introduce this truncated 2nd International ‘Marxism’ into Russia, the whole pre-1883 dimension of the Marxist analysis of the ‘Russian question’, unearthed by Bordiga, was totally lost in a productivist chorus. The linear, mechanistic affirmation of ‘progress’ that is the core of Enlightenment historical thought, which was taken over into a ‘stage’ theory of history by vulgar Marxism, has no feel for the Russian agrarian commune, as Marx did. The Gemeinwesen (material human community) telos of communism is suppressed for productivism.” (Goldner, 1991)

⁴¹ Goldner, 1991

I think it is important to recognize a discrepancy that can locate if one compares ‘What is False Consciousness?’ (WFC) with this paper. In WFC, I suggest a phenomenon of the ‘bureaucratization’ of the working class movement which accounts for the ‘betrayals of the working class’ that the Second International, SPD and other groups engaged in: “After Marx died, an increasingly economic interpretation of Marx started to predominate within the socialist movement. In essence, Marxism became a form of reformist economic determinism. According to this reformist tendency, by its laws of motion, capitalism was doomed to breakdown, and thus, reforms could accelerate its breakdown.” (Aufheben, 1993). They didn’t talk about the working class’s revolutionary potential. Rather, they tended to accept its potential as a given, but only when capitalism broke down. There was very little discussion of how the working class’s view of the social world affects the possibility of revolutionary struggle.

There were structural factors associated with this changing ideology. Increasingly, trade unions and left political parties were becoming bureaucratized. People at the top of these unions and parties did not want a revolution – rather they wanted to maintain their social privileges.

This helps explain why most of the European socialist parties supported WWI, despite the fact it involved mass slaughter of the working class. The leaders of the trade-unions and the socialist parties believed that opposing the war, would make them lose their status as relatively privileged individuals. In addition, because workers thought the socialist and trade union movement had their best interests in mind, they accepted the movement’s views. (ie their false consciousness). (Student ID: #324597 yr: 2003)

The argument I outlined in WFC is derived from Weber, the Italian Elitist School of Sociology (eg Pareto, Michels, Mosca etc) and among marxists, Lukacs. The argument I have developed in this paper, is somewhat different, suggesting that the official organs of the working class movement became something to complete the ‘capitalist revolution’, it was a ‘substitute bourgeois revolution’. It may be possible these two theories are compatible and thus can be integrated together, but I haven’t worked out how such a synthesis could occur. My current view is, is that the analysis I’ve provided in this paper is theoretically a lot stronger and more satisfying.

⁴² 15. “As many people asked themselves after discovering the 1844 Manuscripts, the *Grundrisse*, the Hegelian ‘fingerprints’ in *Capital*, the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, Lukacs, Korsch, etc., how could the classical workers’ movement have been taken over by ‘vulgar Marxism’? Why does pre-Kantian materialism (i.e. materialism that, unlike Marx’s, has not passed through the dialogue with German idealism and Feuerbach) seem so similar to the 18th century materialism of the Anglo-French Enlightenment, i.e. the ideology of the bourgeois revolution? How does one arrive at a Marxist explanation of the historical hegemony of vulgar Marxism, since Marxism rejects out of hand the psychological/moralistic judgment that ‘they had the wrong ideas’? The answer did not seem so complicated: if the materialism of the classical workers’ movement centered in the SPD from 1860 to 1914, and extended by the Russian Revolution, was epistemologically little different from revolutionary materialism of a bourgeois character, it must be that the classical workers’ movement in Central and Eastern Europe was an extension of the bourgeois revolution. Placing oneself in the position of the admirers of the heroic early SPD, it is hard to think of any other explanation that makes sense. This is, after all, not so very far from Trotsky’s theory of combined and uneven development: where the bourgeoisie is weak and unable to take on the *ancien régime*, the task falls to the working class. (Trotsky’s effort was to believe that the working class was making the socialist revolution.) This ‘vulgar Marxism’ provided the ‘world view’ expressed in the popular pamphlets of the late Engels, and the writings of Bebel, Kautsky, William Liebknecht, the pre-revisionist Bernstein, and Plekhanov – the grey eminences of the Second International, who educated Lenin and the Bolsheviks. It should never be forgotten that Lenin did not begin to see through Kautsky and the SPD ‘center’ of

orthodoxy until 1910-1912, and in 1914 could not believe the newspaper reports that the SPD had voted for war credits. He was that close to these influences. He wrote 'Imperialism' to explain the collapse of the SPD; Trotsky later added the 'absence of revolutionary leadership' to explain the defeat in Western Europe after the war. Raya Dunayevskaya's portrait of Lenin rushing to the Zurich library in September 1914 to read Hegel's Logic (35) to understand the debacle of the SPD may or may not be apocryphal; nevertheless, the 'late Lenin' had no impact on official Marxism after 1917, including in the Fourth International. (Goldner, 1991)

⁴³ 16. "This is not to say that there is no basis for this productivist discourse in Marx's work; it is simply to say that the gulf that separates Marx from all 2nd, 3rd (and 4th) International Marxism is precisely that he is beyond 'pre-Kantian' materialism and way beyond 'monopoly capital' economics that both express a state civil service view of the world." (Goldner, 1991)

⁴⁴ Luxemburg, 1916

⁴⁵ Lukacs, 1971, orig. 1923

⁴⁶ Luxemburg, 1916

⁴⁷ Marcuse is somewhat more optimistic about the possibility of radical social change in the late 60s, than either Adorno and Horkheimer (Adorno was so pessimistic about radical social change, that he retreated in aesthetics – seeing this as a site to keep alive a radical/critical world-view. Horkheimer retreated into religion) However, by the 1970s, he became somewhat more pessimistic (Bronner, 1994)

⁴⁸ Bronner, 1994

⁴⁹ Nick Dyer-Witford perhaps captures this argument best, when he writes:

"Strangely, in the era of that supposedly marked the triumph of the free market, the most technologically advanced medium for planet-wide communication was in fact created on the basis of state support, open usage and cooperative self-organisation. A proliferation of autonomous activity transformed a military-industrial network into a system that in many ways **realises radical dreams of a democratic communication system: omni-purpose, multi-centred, with participants transmitting as well as receiving, near real-time dialogue, a highly devolved management structure** [bold is mine] ..." (Dyer-Witford 1999: 249)

What Future for Socialism/ Communism?

Chris Marsh

Last century, perhaps until Thatcher's era and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, socialism/communism was widely understood as *the* alternative to capitalism. Now socialism/communism is popularly regarded as having been tried and failed, as history not futurity. The 'American Dream' is supposed to be a (multicultural) classless society, so why look ahead to a time when 'class society [will be] finally abolished'¹? An aging set of diehards try to keep socialist ideas going, for academic interest more than to engage in the political process, but younger generations of radicals are more engaged with alternative alternatives to capitalism:

- the merely 'anti-' movements and the World Social Forum with its mass international gatherings;
- the lifestylers, dropouts and sideliners, some of whom – as in the permaculture movement and the ecovillage network – are organised and have agreed goals, methodologies and ideologies, and – to the extent that they are 'political' – lean towards anarchism and social ecology rather than to socialism/communism; and
- lastly, as ever, there are lobby groups, reformers/reformists, and charities, lately grown like Topsy into a major sector of society, with NGOs and big campaigns fronted by A-List celebrities, bankrolled by billionaire philanthropists and by every shape and size of Fund and Trust. World-changing and do-goodery is an industry in the twenty-first century. No wonder socialism/communism is history.

Very occasionally, a spark of interest in socialist ideas in the mind of a young student flames into a passion. For a while he (usually) will raid the shelves of second-hand marxist literature, and seek enlightenment from old comrades holding forth in a pub or bookshop back room. There is evidently a romantic, wacky appeal in *Reds* and all that. And there is something else: a feeling, an urge, a desperation, a sense that all is not well, there has to be another way, and maybe we took the wrong road all those years ago. Sadly, though, the old comrades don't have the answers, and the young enthusiast drifts off, perhaps to 'Make Poverty History' – or down some other road paved with good intentions.

What then do we have to offer, and what must we do – those of us who believe in socialism/communism – to get revolution back on the world agenda? In recent years we have stuck to the prediction/prescription whereby the class struggle will be resolved by the overthrow of the global class of capitalists by the global working class, to bring about a society where each person contributes to the common wealth according to his or her ability, and takes from it according to his or her self-determined needs. This desirable outcome is supposedly held back only by the global working class not realising its commonality of interest and potentially supreme power, so the job of socialists is to inform and educate the working class, and engender solidarity. One reason we fail in this role is our tendency to fall into factions espousing variations of the socialist case, so efforts are made towards solidarity through forming alliances. In Britain in recent years this manifested as the 'Socialist Alliance', but that fell apart again because of disagreements between one much larger group – the Socialist Workers Party – and the others (together making up some 46% of the whole) who were always out-voted. (Like mainstream society, socialists fetishise 'democracy' as 'the majority of those who get to vote get to decide'). What is left today after that fiasco is a patchily active Party called 'Respect' (led by the SWP and fronted by George Galloway, who is proudly paraded as Respect's first Member of Parliament) and a smattering of disgruntled individual socialists and tiny leftie groups, some still hoping to re-launch the Socialist Alliance in the autumn of 2005.

Is forming alliances not the way then? Will individual socialist parties only attract support and votes if fronted by a charismatic leader? Do the compromises that have to be made on procedure or policy make this strategy a waste of time?

In March 2005, a ‘Socialist Unity Conference’ was held on behalf of the 46% against the decision to close the SA in favour of Respect. The Report of the event² conveys its sponsors’ scrupulously ‘democratic’ conference conduct, and outlines their policy under the headings ‘Socialism’, ‘Republicanism’, ‘Internationalism’ and ‘Environmentalism’. The Manifesto of the original Socialist Alliance is still available on an obsolete web site³, and incorporates a whole wish list full of good intentions, impossible to achieve (or render obsolete) ahead of fundamental revolution. An alliance of socialists may perhaps be excused for compiling so ‘reformist’ a document on the grounds that it was put together for SA candidates standing in local government elections. Galloway’s Respect Party seems to have inherited much of the same material about ending the occupation of Iraq and raising the minimum wage etc.⁴, and has a similar excuse. Their Constitution says this:

Our overall aim is to help create a socially just and ecologically sustainable society[, a] society in which social justice is defined as incorporating: the organisation of society in the most open, participative, and accountable way practicable based on common ownership and democratic control; the maximum freedom for the individual commensurate with the freedom of others; the fight against, and ultimate abolition of, racism, sexism and all forms of discrimination on grounds of religion, disability, age or sexual identity; the ultimate abolition of all forms of economic exploitation and social oppression; the promotion of peace and a system of justice which gives defence from tyranny, prejudice and the abuse of power; [and] the promotion of social, economic and cultural structures which are ecologically sustainable and supportive to global ecosystems.⁵

That passage can be read as a socialist agenda, but Respect literature is predominantly reformist, and membership is open to anyone generally sympathetic to the Party’s aims. It must be uncertain how long the patchy support Respect enjoys will last, especially if George Galloway moves on or its special appeal to Asian communities wanes.

What can socialists/ communists learn from this failed attempt at alliance building? How can we avoid a similar debacle in future? First of all, clearly, we need to do some work on what makes genuine participatory democracy.⁶ Secondly, we must avoid the trap of trying to exploit upsurges of popular protest. The current ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign is such a trap waiting for us to fall into. One World-in-Commoner returned from the big G8 demo in Edinburgh with this message: ‘It’s easy to dismiss the motives and politics of the vast majority of marchers as reformist, pro-fair-trade etc. but it was encouraging to see so many from diverse groups and nations who oppose poverty and want something done about it. I think *any movement towards socialism/communism will need to embrace inclusiveness and diversity while maintaining a principled opposition against reformism.*’⁷ (My italics) But this is teetering on the brink of another bandwagon ‘trap’ like the one Respect fell into. A group determined on turning the G8 demo into a ‘Carnival for Full Enjoyment’ had this to say: ‘Since the G8 last met in the UK in 1998, we’ve seen more social cuts, privatisation and compulsory work schemes in Europe and beyond. This is part of a continuing enclosure of resources and means of living — such as water, land and housing — around the world. Now the G8 bosses meeting in Gleneagles claim to address concerns about climate chaos and world poverty. But they really aim to strengthen the system at the root of these conditions, and to find more efficient ways of managing, exploiting and enclosing us. We can only stop it by abolishing a profit-based economy; by dismantling the states and borders that divide us.’⁸ With that kind of local-to-global

insight, socialism/ communism can be reclaimed as *the* alternative to capitalism, but with a different – and much more radical – agenda from the old marxist prediction/prescription.

The new agenda involves ‘unlearning our learning’⁹. Rather than constantly looking back to marxist literature that is from fifty to over one hundred and fifty years old, we must be prepared to look ahead, stop being coy about what a socialist future would be like, and make alliances with people who are sidelining capitalism now. We should give up on the notion that capitalism is a necessary stage in a process leading to a socialist society. In fact human survival is uncertain due to over-exploitation of the land we depend on for everything – a crisis that has crept up on us due to alienation from the land from long before the capitalist era. Land degradation is a huge subject and I will not attempt even to define it here, but there are texts available.¹⁰ It is the issue of climate change which is the hot topic at the G8, and the Editorial in the latest issue of *Permaculture Magazine* included this grim summary:

The British Antarctic Survey reports that the West Antarctic icesheet is melting. If it collapses the sea levels could rise more than 16 feet. Both London and Bangladesh will be drowned. Meanwhile, American scientists now predict that the likelihood of the Gulf Stream ‘pump’ switching off due to excessive meltwater in the Arctic is greater than 50%. And the glaciers in the Himalayas that ensure the annual flow for the river systems of the Indian subcontinent and SE Asia are retreating. Without the irrigation they provide, 1 billion people will be displaced. Then there are the matters of CO₂ dissolving in the oceans, acidifying the seas and making them virtually uninhabitable; a 1°C rise in temperature making tropical rainforests unviable; and a 1-2°C rise making trout disappear from the Rockies. Even if we stopped all emissions now there is still likely to be a 0.6°C rise because the effects of climate change happen over decades, not years. The grimmest prediction is that there will be a 90% die off of the global human population.¹¹

Capitalism – for reasons well understood by socialists – will not be deterred by concerns about pollution. However, it may have to respond to the twin concern of ‘Oil Peak’, and in his book on this¹², Matt Savinar points to the US ‘descent into fascism’, and says the US government will ‘go to war to get oil and kill anyone who gets in the way.’ That sounds bad enough, but Savinar goes on to explore possible alternatives to oil and says why they cannot stem off the inevitable:

... even ‘free energy’ – were it a reality – would not change the fundamental issue that humans are up against: the earth has a carrying capacity, and we have used up the super-abundant resource, oil, over the last 150 years to systematically deplete virtually every other resource: top soil, fresh water, forests, biodiversity and minerals. This is why we will not just be quietly slipping back to the 1700s but will be more likely to go straight back to the Stone Age. For example, pre-industrial societies mined copper from ores with 30-50% metal. Nowadays, a typical copper mine averages less than 0.8% copper which can only be extracted using large amounts of energy. No oil, no copper and no anything else that we take for granted in the modern world.¹³

Twenty years ago one could argue that climate change – then called the Greenhouse Effect – could be averted by addressing land degradation. Land regenerated after millennia of over-exploitation to feed urban populations¹⁴ and planted with trees, would thrive on the newly released carbon dioxide. I spent the 1980s arguing against the ‘pollution’ bias in the British environmental movement: toxic waste, nuclear waste, acid rain, CFCs etc., with only two concerns relating to land use: saving the tropical forests and conserving the pretty bits of the British countryside. At that time, even environmentalists were alienated from the land and oblivious to land use concerns. Today there is more awareness, particularly of the desirability of buying local food, not just because it is more

nutritious, but also to support local growers and save 'food miles' and packaging. The idea of planting trees to mop up CO2 is still current¹⁵, but few people believe that is the solution to climate change, and of course the oil peak scenario must mean that the remaining oil should be conserved for chemical products, not burned.

I mentioned earlier the need for socialists/ communists to 'unlearn our learning', which requires an honest appraisal of the precious marxist canon, and being prepared to discard what is obsolete. For instance, socialism was not conceived by Marx as a rescue package for a dying and depleted planet; his enthusiastic predictions depended on the 'massive ... productive forces' achieved under capitalism, whose social relations would become fetters, so that – following the pattern of earlier transitions – socialism would burst forth¹⁶. Marxists have seen social change as a linear progression:

Capitalism has not existed for all time but is the outcome of a process of social evolution. Starting with primitive communism in which property was held in common, followed in turn by the kind of society known in Greece and Rome, based on production by chattel slave labour, and by Feudal society out of which capitalism grew. In each of the societies after primitive communism there has been exploitation of one class by another but the form of exploitation has changed. The feudal serf was not 'owned' as the chattel slave had been, but he was tied to the land of the manorial lord and under obligation to give unpaid labour on the lord's land while free to maintain himself by his labour on land under his control. ... The evolution of property society reaches its limit with the advent of capitalism. The establishment of Socialism and with it the end of exploitation is the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind. The working class will therefore be the last exploited class to achieve its emancipation.¹⁷

This simplistic European Marxist prediction/prescription results in a bizarre collusion between socialists/ communists and the capitalist system they deplore, because capitalism is accepted as a necessary stage on the way to a socialist society. So whilst we dismiss the aims of Make Poverty History as reformist, we have no radical position to take against the G8 development project in Africa.

The aims of Make Poverty History are: 'trade justice, debt cancellation, and more and better aid for the world's poorest countries'.¹⁸ 'Trade justice' is seen as the primary aim, and the most demanding and contentious. It is based on the premise that the people of Africa are poor because their countries are 'underdeveloped', and all will be well if the rich countries concede to them fair trade in their cash crops, raw materials and manufactures. Bob Geldof has been fronting a TV programme on Africa, and (not being a regular viewer) I happened on the first of these in which he showed a part of Africa – I think in Tanzania – where people were living sustainably and happily in small hamlets – tiny social groups – in amongst their food-growing gardens. But these people are being resettled because their old land is being expropriated for cash crops. Geldof interviewed one of the recently resettled people, who said they couldn't get on harmoniously in the new large communities and the poorer patches of land they have been given are some distance from the settlement and in the rainy season cannot be reached due to mud.¹⁹ Intrigued by this confirmation of my long-held antipathy to so-called development, I searched on the web for something more authoritative, and found Chapter 8 of an e-text of *African Agriculture: The Critical Choices*.²⁰ The author, Henry Mapolu, describes the same process as in the Geldof programme taking place from the colonial period to the 1980s. Mapolu relates how the people resist resettlement and cash cropping, and resume subsistence farming in the old way, which may be why the process of resettlement is never complete and still goes on.

Enforced resettlement – often described in and labelled with different terms – has been a crucial aspect of human history, but it has happened patchily, sporadically and out of sight. The more modern history books and various political texts make occasional references to complex rural systems disrupted despite resistance. A thousand years ago, in the Anglo-Saxon period, much of Britain was a patchwork of hamlets with their own gardens, open-field strips and pastures²¹, before the Norman conquest brought in feudalism, and later there were further disruptions with the Enclosures and Clearances. In 1853 Marx writes of an ‘Indian society [with] no history ... but the history of successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society.’²² These rulers operated hands-off systems of exploitation management whereby they creamed off surpluses but left the ‘fabric of traditional rural independence alone’, a practice which the British disrupted by instituting formal deeds to land.²³ In his article, Marx writes of England’s ‘double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerative—the annihilation of the old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.’ Marx’s conclusion is worth quoting in full:

The devastating effects of English industry, when contemplated with regard to India, a country as vast as Europe, and containing 150 millions of acres, are palpable and confounding. But we must not forget that they are only the organic results of the whole system of production as it is now constituted. That production rests on the supreme rule of capital. The centralization of capital is essential to the existence of capital as an independent power. The destructive influence of that centralization upon the markets of the world does but reveal, in the most gigantic dimensions, the inherent organic laws of political economy now at work in every civilized town. The bourgeois period of history has to create the material basis of the new world—on the one hand the universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind, and the means of that intercourse; on the other hand the development of the productive powers of man and the transformation of material production into a scientific domination of natural agencies. Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth. When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.²⁴

That process is taking a long time to work its way through the world, partly due to resistance to resettlement, but also due to former colonies being deliberately underdeveloped. India today is certainly becoming more urban²⁵, but 70% still live in rural villages, 90% of which have a population of less than 2000, into which business is managing to make some inroads.²⁶ Gramsci’s ‘Theory of Subordination and Hegemony’ shows that he followed Marx in seeing it as necessary for the peasant societies of Southern Italy to be disrupted and dislocated, through war if necessary, in order to bring them into solidarity with the working class of the industrialised North²⁷. But wresting the land from the peasants, and the alienation from the land of urban populations (in Britain’s so-called villages and towns, as well as in cities proper), has allowed land degradation worldwide to spread and worsen largely unobserved and ignored except by specialists. And land degradation – exacerbated by climate change and oil peak – renders capitalism unsustainable and a new world founded on its achievements an impossible dream.

My aim in this article has been to begin to wean socialists/ communists off the old Marxist prediction/prescription, in order that we may again become *the* alternative to capitalism. Questioning the prediction/prescription is the first stage – and I have suggested that this requires that we ‘unlearn our learning’. Next I have suggested that we align ourselves to other radical world

changers, rather than get on populist bandwagons or make reformist compromises that perpetuate the collusion with capitalism that the social evolution model got us into. The permaculture movement and the global ecovillages network, in particular, are actually more radical than socialists/ communists because they are addressing the most serious threat to life on earth: land degradation,²⁸ and they are putting their principles, theory and expertise into practice all around the world. A little exploration of how far these initiatives have progressed will show that they need to get political if the land use revolution is to move fast enough to avert the looming crisis. And there will come a time when their progress is perceived as threatening to capitalist vested interests, and campaigning for mass support will be essential. Socialists/ communists have nothing to lose but our obsolete theory. We have a world to win.

¹ *Historical Materialism* (Socialist Party of Great Britain pamphlet, 1975), p.1

² http://www.democracyplatform.org.uk/SOCIALIST_UNITY_CONF_REPORT_rtf.doc

³ http://socialistalliance.org/SAarchive/resources/elections/SAManifesto_27_03_4.html [accessed 1 July 2005]

⁴ <http://www.respectcoalition.org/index.php?sec=39> [accessed 1 July 2005]

⁵ <http://www.respectcoalition.org/index.php?ite=418> [accessed 1 July 2006]

⁶ <http://esf2004.net/en/tiki-index.php?page=LdsNotesDemocracies> [accessed 5 July 2005]

⁷ Message from JP to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/worldincommon/>, 4 July 2005

⁸ <http://www.nodeal.org.uk/> [accesses 5 July 2005]

⁹ 'An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *boundary 2*, Vol.20, No.2 (Summer 1993), 24-50 (p.24)

¹⁰ Recommended books on land degradation: Vernon Gill Carter and Tom Dale, *Topsoil and Civilization* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Land and People* (Sydney: Reed New Holland, 1997), Johan Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilisation* (London: Penguin, 1994), Andrew Goudie, *The Human Impact on the Natural Environment: Third Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield, *Land Degradation and Society* (London: Methuen, 1987), Piers Blaikie, *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* (Harlow, Essex: Longman Scientific and Technical, 1987), John A. Dixon, David E. James and Paul B. Sherman, *The Economics of Dryland Management* (London: Earthscan, 1989), Simmons, I G, *Changing the Face of the Earth*, (Oxford:Blackwell, 1989) Plus there is plenty of information on land degradation worldwide on the internet, one recent *Google* came up with:

<http://www.growbiointensive.org/biointensive/soil.html>

http://www.uea.ac.uk/dev/faculty/stocking/ldd_paper.pdf

http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/media_info/press_kit/fact7_agriculture.pdf

and on unsustainability <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC19/Brown.htm> [accessed 3 July 2005]

¹¹ Maddy Harland, 'Editorial', *Permaculture Magazine*, Issue No.44 (East Meon, Hampshire: Permanent Publications, 2005), p.2, attributed to Michael McCarthy, *Independent* on 'IPCC'.

¹² *THE OIL AGE IS OVER: What To Expect When The World Runs Out Of Cheap Oil 2005-2050*, by Matt Savinar, J.D. Morris Publishing, 2004. 216 x 140mm, 200pp. US\$33.95 (inc. p&p to UK) (UK£17.50 inc. p&p approx.) Available from: www.lifeaftertheoilcrash.net

¹³ Graham Strouts, in 'Reviews', *Permaculture Magazine*, Issue No.43 (East Meon, Hampshire: Permanent Publications, 2005), p.56

¹⁴ The book which first showed me that organic farming would not solve all the problems associated with post-WWII industrial agriculture was: Vernon Gill Carter and Tom Dale, *Topsoil and Civilization* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974)

¹⁵ According to this web site: <http://www.americanforests.org/resources/ccc/>, you have to plant one new tree per 300 kg of CO₂, assuming the tree absorbs 0.9 tons in 40 years.

¹⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. by Samuel Moore in 1888 from orig. text of 1848 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), [pp.52-60]

¹⁷ The Socialist Party of Great Britain, *Object and Declaration of Principles: Socialist Principles Explained* (London: SPGB, 1975), p.16

¹⁸ <http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/docs/demoguide.pdf> [accessed 4 July 2005]

¹⁹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/africalives/features/geldof_episodes.shtml [accessed 4 July 2005]

²⁰ The United Nations University/Third World Forum, Studies In African Political Economy, *African Agriculture: The Critical Choices*, Ed. by Hamid Ait Amara and Bernard Founou-Tchuigoua, with a Preface by Samir Amin, (London: Zed Books, 1990) <http://www.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu28ae/uu28ae00.htm#Contents> '8. Tanzania: Imperialism, the state and the peasantry'

<http://www.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu28ae/uu28ae0h.htm#8.%20tanzania:%20imperialism,%20the%20state%20and%20the%20peasantry> [accessed 4 July 2005]

²¹ H.R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (harlow, Essex, Longman, 1994), pp.19ff.

²² Karl Marx, 'The Future Results of British Rule in India' in *KarlMarx: Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.332-3 [orig. publ. in *New York Daily Tribune*, 1853]

²³ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 7th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.196-7

²⁴ Marx, pp.332-6

²⁵ <http://www.indianngos.com/issue/cities&urban/statistics/> http://infochangeindia.org/urban_india_01.jsp [accessed 3 July 2005]

²⁶ <http://www.rediff.com/money/2005/jun/29spec.htm> [accessed 3 July 2005]

²⁷ Nadia Urbatini, 'From the Periphery of Modernity: Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Subordination and Hegemony', *Political Theory*, Vol.26, No.3 (June 1998) <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0090-5917%28199806%2926%3A3%3C370%3AFTPOMA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O> [accessed 2 March 2005]

²⁸ See www.permaculture.org.uk, www.permaculture.co.uk, www.des4rev.org.uk/mollisondes4rev.htm, www.des4rev.org.uk/bookchinsociety.htm, <http://gen.ecovillage.org>, <http://www.auroville.org/>, <http://www.permacultura.org/>, www.des4rev.org.uk

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ISBN 0141011017, 288 pages, £7.99**

Reviewed by *Torgun Bullen*

Simon Baron-Cohen is Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the University of Cambridge in the Departments of Experimental Psychology and Psychiatry. He is also Co-director of the Autism Research Centre (ARC) in Cambridge and Director of CLASS, the Cambridge Lifespan Asperger Syndrome Service. *The Essential Difference* is a book written as a result of his interest in and research into autism. Autism is a spectrum of neurological 'disorders' (many prefer to call them neurological variations), which range from a mildly affected diagnosis of 'Asperger Syndrome' or 'High-Functioning Autism' to 'Classic Autism' at the other end of the spectrum.

The behavioural characteristics associated with autism are:

- significant difficulties with social interactions
- significant difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication
- significant difficulties in the development of play (no imaginative play)
- highly restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour and interests
- highly resistant to even slight changes in routines

There are many more males with a diagnosis of autism than females. For example, the National Autistic Society cites ratios of 4:1 (a Swedish study in 1993) and 3:1 (the ratio of male to female clients in NAS adult services).

Baron-Cohen states the theory of his book in the opening paragraph:

The female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy. The male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems.

Briefly, he defines the concepts as follows: 'Empathizing is the drive to identify another person's emotions and thoughts, and to respond to them with an appropriate emotion.' 'Systemizing is the drive to analyse, explore and construct a system.'

Baron-Cohen essentially believes that autism is behaviour associated with 'the extreme male brain'.

Because of the political sensitivity of the subject, Baron-Cohen hesitated for many years before writing the book. It is easy to see that a theory such as this could be used by extreme right-wingers to further their notion that women are less able than men. For socialists and feminists, perhaps his theories do not make for very comfortable reading. However, observing the typical interests and behaviour of men and women in society, I cannot but wonder whether these differences can *all* be accounted for as purely the result of upbringing.

Why can nearly all men with a home computer quote the relevant numbers about the size of its memory and hard drive, the speed of the chip and all the other hardware details – and most women who own computers just have not bothered to take note? ‘It works, it does what I want it to do’, seems to be the attitude of most women and they leave it at that. A very competent female computer programmer I knew (with a first degree in computer science) did not know the specifications of her home computer. How many women do you know with gadget mania? How many men? Virtually all the men in the office where I work are obsessed with gadgets. They come in with the latest hand-held devices that do god-knows-what, the more buttons, the better – the faster, the better; the more intricate, the better.

Baron-Cohen is at pains to point out that he is not a ‘male supremacist’. He emphasises that there is range of these behaviours; that they overlap to a great degree; that most men and women fall within the broad overlap in the middle, where they are all more or less equally good at empathising and systemising. He quotes very eminent female scientists that he works with and gives them credit for their achievements. He is in favour of encouraging women into the sciences and states the need for us all to consider the individual first and foremost, and what that individual can achieve in life. He stresses that he is only speaking of statistical averages, that there will be women out there with ‘typical male brains’ and men with ‘typical female brains’.

His interest kicks in at the extremes of the abilities, particularly ‘the extreme male brain’. Whether ‘the extreme female brain’ exists is still a subject for research, he says. Most mathematical geniuses are men. Most fanatical collectors are men – the object of the collecting being to construct a system for the collection and to complete it. Men like keeping lists, ordering lists, ticking things off their lists. Take bird watchers, for example, or men interested in the football league tables, or philatelists. These interests are virtually all male interests.

People with Asperger syndrome are often exceptionally gifted, in one narrow area, which can absorb all their energies. This is nearly always on the mathematics or science side of things, hardly ever do they get involved with anything involving the creative use of language or areas requiring good imagination or social skills.

Baron-Cohen argues that social interaction is very complex, with inputs coming from all directions simultaneously and that the ‘rules’ (if there are rules) are constantly changing. Systemizing is more rigidly rule-based, whereas ‘the rules’ in empathizing keep changing:

Consider the rule ‘if people get what they want, they will be happy’. Say that you followed the rule and gave Hannah what she said she wanted for her birthday; why is she still not happy? Systemizing just cannot get a foothold into things like a person’s fluctuating feelings.

People on the autistic spectrum have great difficulty with the changing 'rules' of social interaction. A typical example quoted in the book is a professor of mathematics at Cambridge diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, doing research into extremely difficult mathematics – but unable to conduct simple conversations on the telephone because he has no concept of polite chit-chat. Social niceties is unknown territory to him; for example, when guests visit him and his family at home, he may suddenly and unannounced disappear into a room to sit and read on his own.

Baron-Cohen discusses evidence for greater empathy in girls from studies made into the play and behaviour of children. In a chapter discussing the difference between the way boys and girls play, he concludes:

On average, boys produce much more antagonistic behaviour, and shockingly, you can see these differences from as early as two years old. As we saw earlier, little boys also tend to have more trouble learning to share toys. In one study, young boys showed fifty times more competition, while girls showed twenty times more turn-taking. These are everyday examples of large sex differences in empathizing.

In order to infer what another person might be thinking or feeling, you need a 'Theory of Mind'. Baron-Cohen says that "A number of studies suggest that by the age of three young girls are already ahead of boys in their ability to infer what people might be thinking or intending – that is, in using a 'theory of mind'."

When people are diagnosed for autism, it usually involves a 'theory of mind' test. For a young child, it may typically go as follows:

The person conducting the test, the child and a third person are in the room. A toy is put away in a toy chest, in full view of everyone in the room. The third person leaves the room. The conductor of the test takes the toy out of the chest and puts it behind some books on a book shelf. The third person enters the room again. If an autistic child is asked where the person who has just re-entered the room thinks the toy is, he or she will usually answer: 'On the book shelf.' Although this is just a simple test, it illustrates the fact that for severely autistic people, it is impossible to imagine what another person's experiences and feelings mount up to. They think everyone else's picture of the world is the same as their own.

People with classic autism more often than not have very little or no speech. Those diagnosed with high-functioning autism can have good or seemingly 'normal' speech, but in most cases developed their speech late as toddlers. Even extremely bright and able people with Asperger's syndrome sometimes have very stilted or odd speech. Baron-Cohen puts forward the theory that the greater female ability to communicate ties in with their relative superiority at using language. About sex differences in the use of language, he says the following:

On average, women produce more words in a given period, fewer speech errors (such as using the wrong word) and perform better in the ability to discriminate speech sounds (such as consonants and vowels) than do men. Their average sentences are also longer, and their utterances show standard grammatical structure and correct pronunciation more often. They also find it easier to articulate words, and do this faster than men. Women can also recall words more easily. Most men have more pauses in their speech. And at the clinical level of severity, males are at least two times more likely to develop language disorders, such as stuttering.

Baron-Cohen puts the sex differences in systemizing and empathizing ability down to social as well as biological factors. If some of these factors are biologically determined, the next question to answer is why evolution favoured different abilities in men and women. He goes on to suggest possible answers to this question.

The important thing to bear in mind in reading this book, is that Baron-Cohen's theory only generalises about men's and women's varying abilities. Of course there are men with very good empathizing abilities and also many brilliant female scientists. The fact that he points out that there is a trend or a tendency in abilities and interests for either sex, does not mean that he therefore wants to exclude either sex from entering any field of study.

Of what interest is all of this to socialists? I think it is interesting for a number of reasons. For many years, most of the socialist movement adhered to something very close to a 'blank sheet' theory of human behaviour. When we were born, as males or females, all of our subsequent behaviour would be determined by society, none of it would be shaped by the genetic component – so the theory went. This is quite clearly wrong. Of course the environment is very important, but so are our genes. As socialists, our fear of the label 'genetic determinism' is so strong that I am concerned that we sometimes ignore recent important research – such as the research currently being conducted into autism.

I am coming to the conclusion that, in general (again, I emphasise, 'in general'), women provide the social 'glue' that makes our communities and homes pleasant places to be in. It is a contribution that is woefully underestimated in our society, but one that should be celebrated and emphasised in our efforts to bring about a revolution. If we want to grow our movement, a competitive, 'fight-club' type of environment is not going to be attractive to most women (or to a lot of men, for that matter).

There is not going to be uniform behaviour in socialism. Behaviour will be shaped by the environment but also by a genetic component (like, in all probability, autism). Because our behaviour will vary, there will also in all likelihood be some anti-social behaviour that we will need to keep in check by a system of 'rules' or 'socialist law'.

For a fuller explanation of the theories behind *The Essential Difference* it is a good idea to also read *Mindblindness* by Simon Baron-Cohen. A short summary of it follows.

Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and the Theory of Mind
Simon Baron-Cohen

Normal humans everywhere not only 'paint' their world with colour, they also 'paint' beliefs, intentions, feelings, hopes, desires, and pretences onto agents in their social world A growing society of cognitive scientists has concluded that humans everywhere interpret the behaviour of others in these mentalistic terms because we all come equipped with a 'theory of mind' module (ToMM) that is compelled to interpret others this way, with mentalistic terms as its native language. We are 'mindreaders' by nature, building interpretations of the mental events of others and feeling our constructions as sharply as the physical objects we touch.

So say John Tooby and Leda Cosmides in their Foreword to this book. In it Baron-Cohen develops his interpretation of the mental modules necessary to play 'social chess' – to be able to put oneself in the place of somebody else, to make reasonable guesses as to their mental states and to take action accordingly.

'Neurotypical' people are able to use these modules to good effect, to show empathy and understanding of others when needed, to join a new social group or conversation without too many problems, to share jokes and witticisms, to understand sarcasm. Sometimes the ability to understand quickly the intention of others can save one's life.

Autistic people find these social situations most of us take for granted a struggle and a constant puzzle. Although many understand and make jokes, most things are taken seriously and literally. They are vulnerable to people out to cheat and deceive, as they do not pick up the signs.

Baron-Cohen groups the modules necessary for a full range of mental state concepts into four (a brief summing up):

The Intentionality Detector (ID)

The ability to predict the movement of an animal (or human) in terms of where it is going and what its goal is – then possibly take avoiding actions.

The Eye-Direction Detector (EDD)

The importance of eyes to animals – the EDD's function is firstly; to detect the presence of eyes, and secondly, to detect the direction of the eyes. (What is the object of interest?)

The Shared Attention Mechanism (SAM)

This is the ability to confirm that the other animal and the Self are both interested in a third object.

The Theory-of-Mind Mechanism (ToMM)

This is a system for inferring the full range of mental states from behaviour and for turning all mentalistic knowledge from all modules into a useful theory. For example, it is capable of understanding pretence, '... a host of studies show that around the age of 18-24 months human toddlers begin to pretend and recognize the pretending of others, and this seems to mark a qualitative change in their play.'

Mindblindness explores why mind reading is an evolutionary advantage, discusses whether our nearest relatives, the chimpanzees and the apes, have a TOMM and explains why Baron-Cohen and his research team believe that autism is caused by having a TOMM which does not function 'normally'.

The book has a long and interesting chapter on 'The Language of the Eyes', discussing the vast range of emotions we are able to convey with our expressions in and around our eyes. He lists an impressive English vocabulary for describing the meanings the eyes can convey and quotes poetry, like the following passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson in 'Conduct of Life: 5. Behavior':

An eye can threaten like a loaded and levelled gun, or can insult like hissing or kicking; or, in its altered mood, by beams of kindness, it can make the heart dance with joy.