

Radical amnesia and the Revolutionary Communist Party

DON MILLIGAN, January 8th 2008

My time as a communist was a chequered one, involving a zigzag Stalinism, first from Moscow to Beijing (1960-67), thence to Trotskyism (1967-1973), coming out into the anarchic libertarianism of the gay liberation movement (1971-1982), then the double back to the rigours of party life in the Revolutionary Communist Party (1983-1990), first as a workplace activist, then as a branch organiser and the party's typesetter.

It was a long political career involving active trade unionism, incessant organising, meetings, demonstrations, paper sales, campaigns, the intensities of groupuscule loyalties and betrayals, all sustained by belief in the historical necessity of communism and the centrality of the class struggle in the process of social transformation.

As a consequence of my experience in the Young Communist League, the Communist Party of Great Britain, the International Socialists and Workers Fight, I was no stranger to the ritual deceptions of 'democratic centralism', the arcane procedure where a dictatorial clique at the head of an organisation routinely orchestrate the election of themselves and a shifting constellation of leading comrades. They were, for the most part, ritual deceptions, which I believed were necessary in the struggle to build a party capable of forging an effective revolutionary leadership.

So, when as a consequence of the full-blooded emergence of Thatcherism, the Brixton Riots, and the Miners' Strike, I was drawn back to the need for the 'Leninist' party in the form of the RCP I was not

surprised by the party's tight discipline or the incessant work. What attracted me about the party was its insistence upon challenging the verities of Labourism – its refusal to abide by the shibboleths that marked the perimeters of leftwing thought. Although I only became aware of this much later, the very thing which I found attractive about the party was precisely the feature that made it capable of attracting deracinated individuals like myself, and like the largely middle class young people, with little or no understanding of socialism or of the history of the socialist movement which we recruited; young RCP comrades, contacts and full members, were by and large simply not socialists.

It took an unconscionable length of time for this to dawn on me, and to recognise fully that the party leaders, Frank Furedi, Michael Fitzpatrick, and Mick Hume, were not socialists either. They were, of course, Leninists of the purist kind, virulently hostile to the rest of the labour and socialist movement, and committed absolutely to a life *without illusions* and sentiment. They had, like the rest of us, been driven mad by the glamour of the October Revolution and the spectacle of a tiny group of deracinated revolutionaries seizing the bridle of the Revolution and riding it into power, dazzled by a confection of voluntarism and theoretical certainties. The belief that the Party and its leadership were owed an undivided loyalty flowed from the belief in the necessity of building an institution capable of centralising the experience of the working class – we knew that the Party had not yet achieved that exalted status, but that was the objective and that is what commanded our loyalty. This outlook was not rooted in the psychology or personality traits of the RCP's leaders or those of the members. The so-called 'sect-like' behaviour of the RCP was an integral part of the communist experience represented by Stalinist, Maoist and Trotskyist traditions. It was an

intrinsically authoritarian tradition in which the society's interests were represented by the working class, the Party represented the working class's interests, and the Party's Political Committee represented the Party's interests.

In keeping with this Marxist-Leninist tradition the internal life of the RCP was characterised by a 'no-nonsense' approach to existing capitalist relations. And, like other Leninists, and it must be said, the rest of the British left, the leadership of the RCP saw no difficulty in aiming to become rich and successful – the social and financial hierarchy of ordinary bourgeois life was simply replicated inside the Party. This was and is, of course, common to all socialist organisations and milieu in Britain.

The objective of the RCP's leadership was the seizure of power and the refashioning of society by social forces and organisations, which they would seek to ride and direct in the turbulent chaos of revolutionary upheaval. This was their *only* illusion, the illusion that animated them. Consequently, when it became abundantly clear that the working class had disappeared as a political entity and the prospects for Bolshevism were precisely zero it was necessary for them to seek a way of reengaging with bourgeois society. They could not, however, do this precipitately. They had an organisation of a hundred or so members, several hundred supporters, a monthly magazine, a building and other assets, to consider. They couldn't simply dissolve the organisation without proper political and organisational preparation.

It was reasonably clear to the leadership by 1989-1990 that things could not continue. In the context of the reunification of Germany, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the incipient decay of Yugoslavia, and the collapse of 'official' communism, few people could any longer harbour illusions in the prospects of a politics predicated on the

political activity and agency of the working class. It was evident that as the Stalinist dictatorships collapsed the only option was the restoration or installation of capitalism. The ‘working class’ was nowhere to be seen – except, of course, in mass demonstrations throughout Eastern and Central Europe backing the end of Communism. Michael Fitzpatrick knew that the hubris of the RCP’s summer school, *Preparing for Power*, was unsustainable; *Towards 2000* was resorted to for a while, but he and the leaders knew the game was up.

The political retreat to the ‘defence of enlightenment values’ and the virtues of ‘progress’ was speeded up, as they drifted further and further into controversialism, as a way of covering their retreat from Marxism and branding all opponents as slaves of received wisdom. This is what led them to defending Serb nationalism and victimhood, and to Mick Hume (Eddie Veale) penning the article in which the Serbs were depicted as the “‘White Niggers’ of the New World Order” (*LM* issue 45, July 1992). By the summer of 1996 the strategic dismissal of Marxism became explicit with the publication by *LM* of their new manifesto, *The Point Is To Change It: A Manifesto for a world fit for people*:

“As Marxists we could go on about poverty, exploitation, and the lack of opportunities open to most people. We could talk about the system of imperialist domination which continues to run the world. There is little doubt that a system narrowly based on profit-creation conflicts with the interests of humanity as a whole. However, there is little point in rehearsing these arguments today. We face some new and far-reaching problems, the most important of which is humanity's lack of belief in itself - in its potential to solve the problems of society and in

its unbounded power of creativity.” (London, *LM*, July 1996, ‘Introduction’).

Evidently the leaders were now ready to dissolve the Party, the whining stick-in-the-mud socialists and communists who’d clung to their Party membership through thick and thin were finally off-loaded, enabling the new milieu of bright young researchers, media pundits and administrators to forge ahead; the ‘Marxist Review of Books’ appeared for the last time in *LM* issue 96 reappearing as ‘Reading Between the Lines’ in the re-launched bigger and brighter *LM* of issue 97 in February 1997.

The RCP’s former leaders, as professional men, academics, medics, and journalists were now well placed to reengage fully with bourgeois society. Frank Furedi’s worst nightmare, of going down in history “merely as Plekanhov” rather than “as Lenin” was over. Now such fears could be entirely forgotten as Frank and his pals set out to employ the network of needy and eager young professionals, assiduously created since the early nineties, to achieve an entirely different kind of influence and notoriety.

Consequently, there is no need for the hostility and conspiratorial accounts of lobbywatch.org and others. The post-Bolshevik networks, which have given rise to Spiked Online and the Institute of Ideas are merely part of the commentariat. Their ‘sect-like’ behaviour and loyalties are rooted in shared interests and beliefs and in the common pursuit of self-interest. There is nothing sinister about this. They are only remarkable in being ex-Bolsheviks and in employing the organising skills honed over many years of conjuring something out of nothing. These former comrades and their new friends have as much right, to bang on about progress, censorship, science and technology as anybody else. *Ad hominem* smears and innuendo should be rejected in favour of proper

argument. The fact that former RCP leaders and cadres might also have commercial interests in promoting particular opinions and attitudes does indeed need to be declared when relevant, however, their lucrative participation in the ordinary life of the chattering classes should not be made the occasion for publishing blacklists on the Internet.

In the process of backing up such blacklists, attempts are often made to deploy the *revelations* or *confessions* of disenchanted former RCP members who report Frank Furedi's Svengali-like powers of persuasion or deception, or complain of the personality-crushing procedures favoured by the Party. This tactic is as absurd as it is shameful. People who joined the RCP made a political and personal mistake. This mistake was not a small mis-step; often this decision had very serious and life-altering effects upon the individuals involved. However, we only have ourselves to blame.

What is much more serious from my point of view is the political amnesia which sustains the pundits Frank Furedi, Michael Fitzpatrick, Mick Hume and Claire Fox; what is it which permits them to "look forwards and not backwards", to learn nothing at all from their endorsement of the actions of the IRA, of Slobodan Milosovic and Radovan Karadic's, and their flawed analysis of a host of international developments? What is it that permits them to go on giving political advice and sharing their opinions with us when they have evidently made no attempt whatsoever to analyse the evolution of their own political failure?

This is the most important aspect of the behaviour of the former leaders of the RCP because it is one which they share with the leading lights of *Marxism Today*, the Socialist Workers Party, the various factions of the left of the Labour Party, and many other trends within the anti-capitalist movement

in Britain. The former leaders of the RCP are not alone in reinventing themselves. Nor is it unusual for socialists to be well heeled. They are also typical in refusing to situate consideration of their political failure within an overall analysis of capitalism or an analysis of the experience of competing strategies for the replacement or overthrow of the system. As the left stumbles from one disaster to another it is easy and reassuring to attack the venal opportunism of ex-Bolsheviks running Spiked Online or the Institute of Ideas with allegations of graft and corruption while all the time colluding with a wider political culture on the left which appears spectacularly incapable of assessing its own failures and determining a future for itself.

It is common for people on the left, particularly those in academic life and the media, to reassure themselves by the comforting notion that they were never foolish enough or benighted enough to sign up for *Leninist* illusions. Unfortunately, their foresight in this regard has often rendered them incapable of remembering the political follies and illusions, which they *did* actually sign up for. This broad based, critical, non-sectarian, amnesia is, of course, just as disabling as that of the RCP's former leaders. Indeed, it is much more important, given the numbers and influence which the 'non-sectarian' left have always been able to claim.

What is needed, is not attacks on this or that example of folly or mendaciousness, but a preparedness on the left to engage in a thorough-going analysis of contemporary capitalism and to determine what ways actually lay open to us for the promotion of social solidarity.