

Critique Notes

This issue is largely, though not entirely, devoted to the particular significance of 1956, when Khrushchev's secret speech and its consequences in Eastern Europe signalled the beginning of the end for Stalinism. It was also important in that the withdrawal of the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt showed how far the former colonial powers had declined, third world nationalism had succeeded and the United States had established itself as the incumbent imperial ruler.

In this issue we have not discussed the details of the situation in the Middle East, the particular role of Israel and Zionism and the nature of the left, such as it was, in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Iran, etc. The overthrow of King Feisal of Iraq was clearly part of the decline of British Imperial power and showed why the British were so afraid of Nasser turning to Khrushchev. We know that the Communist Party of Iraq was instrumental in that overthrow and was prevented from taking power in large part because of its Stalinist, and so Soviet, masters. The compromise with General Kassim in power lasted only five years before he was overthrown. Subsequent events led to Saddam Hussein taking power, with the approval of the West, and persecuting the left. We also know that the USA preferred the rise of Islamic fundamentalism to any kind of left, Stalinist or not. The widespread victimisation of the left in the Middle East helped to liquidate that part of it which had not been destroyed by Stalinism, and when nationalism had failed the field was left open to the religious agents of despair and the madmen of Al-Qaida.

Zionism and the Boycott of Israeli Universities

The question of Israel and Zionism will be discussed in future issues, in which we will explore the nature of anti-Semitism, the role of Zionism, the nature of the Israeli state and the situation of the Palestinian people. The British Universities and College Union (UCU), the trade union for British academics, has passed a motion calling on its branches to consider boycotting Israeli universities. This follows motions which were passed by both its merged constituent unions, calling for a similar boycott, though they were later overturned or in abeyance. There has been a huge level of publicity for the motion and its defenders and opponents. This is curious since there is no boycott and will only be one in the unlikely event that the branches of the union agree to call one next year. Furthermore, the boycott itself is only of institutions, not

individuals. This, in itself, makes the motion meaningless, since an institution cannot be boycotted without affecting individuals.

In this process, much has been made of a comparison with South Africa before 1990. As would be clear to anyone who read *Critique* 24, on South Africa, such a comparison is invalid. The political economy of South Africa was based on the super-exploitation of the majority of the population and the so-called black homelands were little more than a propaganda ploy and a means of control over black urban workers. In contrast, Israel has dispossessed the Palestinian population of their land and turned the Israeli state into an exclusive ethnic and religious entity. Nor is it true that the boycott against South Africa caused the South African government to change its attitude. South Africa changed when the US capitalist class decided that it would no longer sustain that country's racist attitude by lending to the South African state and when it was clear that the opposition had been defeated. It helped that the Communist Party, which effectively controlled the ANC, took an increasingly conservative line. For many, the settlement consecrated with the elections of 1994 was a classic sell-out, in which the majority of the population could gain little if anything. Such has been the result. The standard of living of the majority may even be lower than it was in 1994, while a wealthy black bourgeoisie has formed in association with a growing 'middle class'. The point is that boycotts have played a particular class role in the past. While not actually pressurising change, they propel 'elites' to power. It can, however be different if the boycott is called by trade unions on a trade union basis, calling on trade union members to put forward left-wing demands.

In this instance, the boycott proposed is toothless; it proposes a boycott of institutions but not of academics. Much of the opposition on grounds of academic freedom, therefore, is beside the point. As indicated above, it is not at all clear what boycotting an institution, but not academics, can mean. We must, therefore, conclude that the boycott proposed is a signal to Israeli academics and Zionists generally that they have to consider what it means to talk of academic freedom when a section of the student and academic population is segregated in separate institutions, with inferior resources, and subject to constant harassment. Furthermore, it is also clear that the critique of the political economy of Zionism and of Israel is very limited and not at all encouraged.

Of course, Marxist political economy is marginalised, or worse, in most of the world, so Israel is simply showing us that academic freedom is very limited under capitalism. The situation is even worse in most Arab countries, where the regimes can only be described as appalling, both in their level of exploitation of the majority and in the absence of civil rights. That, however, does not alter the responsibility of Israeli academics to speak up against the nature of a regime contingent on the misery of another people.

Much has been made of the fact that academic freedom is under much greater constraint in many other countries that are not being boycotted. That is true and it is a powerful point. After all, there are very few motions, if any, deploring the political discrimination suffered by the left in the UK and other countries of the West. There

were few, if any, motions on the severe penalties that were visited on anti-Stalinists in the former Soviet Union and other Stalinist countries, some of which still exist under Stalinist control. Nonetheless, if the motion can make some people consider the nature of Zionism itself, which is ultimately responsible for the nature of the Israeli state, something will be achieved.

It has to be said, however, that the left must come out clearly both against anti-Semitism and Islamic fundamentalism. It cannot be forgotten that it was the anti-Semitism of the Arab regimes which drove out around one million Jews from their countries and into Israel. If not for this action, Israel might have had difficulty continuing to exist. The Palestinians, of course, are not responsible for the actions of Arab rulers, who at that time were semi-colonial subjects of the West, and must be regarded, on the contrary, as their victims.

The only possible solution is an integrated Israeli-Palestinian society and state, with guaranteed civil and economic rights for the different communities. This, however, is most unlikely to come into existence within capitalism. Both Zionism and Hamas regard such a thing as impossible. A two-state regime with a crippled or economically backward Palestinian state is no solution. Provided the campaign for a boycott is conducted sensibly, it might provoke some people to move out of nationalism and take a more critical attitude to the policies of the Israeli state.¹ That is the most a motion which is not a motion and a boycott which is not a boycott can achieve.

We have still to ask why there is such a hue and cry over the issue. How is it that Harvard's Professor Alan Dershowitz can issue such blood-curdling threats and why has there been such a mobilisation of Jewish and non-Jewish opinion against this motion. Such opponents of the motion have scored an own goal or two, since the only possible point of the movers of the motion or non-motion is to get publicity and in that they have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

Self-evidently, the reason lies in the increasing insecurity both of sections of the Jewish population outside Israel and of Zionism itself. This is partly due to the real global political economic crisis and to the decline of Zionism. Trotsky was also right when he said that in every economic crisis anti-Semitism grows. As we argued in the last issue, anti-Semitism has to be condemned and fought wherever it exists and, unfortunately, some of the movers of the UCU motion failed to condemn the real anti-Semitism in Hamas and Hezbollah.

¹ In this respect the political economy of Israel itself is important. Naomi Klein has brought out the increasing importance of the surveillance and control industry to the Israeli economy and its exports, and related it to academia. 'Thirty homeland security companies have been launched in Israel during the past six months alone, thanks in large part to lavish government subsidies that have transformed the Israeli army and the country's universities into incubators for security and weapons start-ups - something to keep in mind in the debates about the academic boycott'. Naomi Klein, 'How War has Turned into a Brand', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2007, p. 34.

Academic Freedom

Much of the argument on the basis of academic freedom might have had some kind of validity if, as indicated above, academic freedom were not so limited for the left and indeed for dissidents in general. It has always been true that those critical of capitalism and Stalinism have had a hard time in academic institutions, if they are ever allowed to enter those hallowed portals. Many on the left live a double life, writing one thing to be given tenure or promoted and another for their desks or in journals which are outside the purview of academia. The very subject studied by Marxists is often judged illegitimate. Marxist political economy is judged not to be economics or sociology or anything else, not even political economy. Those who were anti-Stalinist suffered a double whammy, as their critique of the Soviet Union and of Stalinist fronts were often judged too extreme, making them unpublishable.

Those critical of established doctrines find life difficult whatever the discipline. The reason lies in the nature of bureaucracy under capitalism. It is in the nature of inquiry, investigation and the discovery of truth that new facts and theories can upset long-held doctrines. As those doctrines are held and taught by people who might lose their positions, reputation and the possibility of further academic promotion, they will tend to resist such critiques. Those who have preserved their integrity might act differently but it is in the nature of the hierarchical academic structure that those who bend to authority will be favoured. Furthermore, it is notoriously hard to judge the quality of well-researched and coherent academic work. The main reason to provide such comparative judgements of the work is commercial—to consider how much more the institution might gain or lose by keeping or promoting people. As a result, the academic process is corrupted by the system which sustains it. Clearly there is academic freedom, but it is constrained and the outcry on the grounds of academic freedom sounds hypocritical, since those who have raised it seldom defend those who need such help the most.

At present, academic freedom is more constrained, partly because of the various laws passed, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, which have to do with protection against terrorism. As Laura Donahue has argued, the danger lies in the atmosphere of fear that such laws and rules engender.² Self-censorship becomes the norm, and hiring committees become more selective when appointing or promoting academics. The increasing stress on value for money and on short-term performance also tends to disadvantage theorists of all kinds, who might take years to produce a meaningful theory. Of course, it is in the nature of such inquiry that the eventual theory might be disproved very quickly. The fact that the author will have had partial insights,

² 'History also demonstrates, particularly in the American context, the widespread use of these powers not just to counter national security threats, but to prevent dissent. In the United States, the witch hunt against Communists resulted in actions being taken against civil rights leaders, the women's movement, and various political parties that disagreed with the *status quo*. Such an atmosphere may discourage citizens from engaging in public discourse, impacting the democratic nature of the state. It may also prevent academics, or those who comment on public policy, from doing so publicly.' Laura K. Donahue, 'Anglo-American Privacy and Surveillance', *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 96:3 (2006), p. 1194.

encouraged other thinkers, developed the basis for the correct theory, and so on might all be ignored, leaving the academic a cast-off hulk. The need for long-term employment without censorship comes up against the money constraint, particularly at present.

Denial of Tenure to the Historian Norman Finkelstein

The hysterical attack on the UCU motion and the alleged statements of Alan Dershowitz, that he will ruin and bankrupt academics who promote the boycott, demonstrate clearly what is what in terms of academic freedom.³ This is the same Alan Dershowitz who, it seems, did his best to ensure that Norman Finkelstein was denied tenure. The De Paul's president accepted that Finkelstein's academic work was of the requisite standard for tenure but argued that his vituperation against other academics and people was such that it vitiated the excellence of his academic work.⁴ In this instance, academic committees recommended tenure and the dean and president turned it down. Even if the president were right about Finkelstein's name calling, denial of tenure by administrators rather than academics calls into question academic freedom. This is simply one more case of this type, only new in that it was the left which was openly denied jobs in the past rather than those critical of aspects of Zionism. No doubt there have been other anti-Zionists who have lost their jobs, but their cases were not made public. This journal carried the case of Professor Bertell Ollman in some detail,⁵ when the president of the University of Maryland revoked his appointment and the matter ended up in the courts.

The New Cold War

US capitalism has wasted no time finding enemies since the end of the Cold War. To add to the war on terror with Al-Qaida and Iraq/Afghanistan, it has found that Russia constitutes a threat, and it has added moral imperatives on global warming for good measure. The first, though real, is wearing thin in the form promoted by Tony Blair and George Bush, the second is nonsense and the third is a moralism which most people will ignore.

The regime in Russia is fundamentally unstable and Putin is himself a weak ruler with limited personal support. Yet, to judge by the press, one would think that Putin is going in the direction of Stalin and the Cold War. The Russian economy today is much weaker than it was in the time of the Soviet Union, the standard of living is still some distance from what it was at that time and capitalism has still to establish itself.

³ 'Alan Dershowitz, Felix Frankfurter Professor of law at Harvard University, has pledged to lead a campaign to visit financial and legal ruin on any UK academic backing a boycott of Israel academe'. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 8 June 2007, p. 9. See also the comments in this respect in letters to the editor by Tony Greenstein and Jonathan Redhead, *ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ <http://www.normanfinkelstein.com/pdf/tenuredenial/Finkelstein,Norman06.08.2007.pdf>.

⁵ 'The Case of Bertell Ollman: Highlights of the Trial', *Critique*, 14 (1981), pp. 109–120.

As a result, it has a strong tendency to disintegrate. The Putin solution is that of the strong state using control over the media, the secret police and the army. The ideology used is that of Russian nationalism. In relation to the West, Russia has a colonial economic relationship, supplying raw materials in exchange for technology and Western goods. Its atomic weapons and ballistic missiles belie its weakness. This is fundamentally the same as in the Soviet era.

As the only means of ideological control that remains is nationalism, Putin has to use it in relation to the West. He has nothing to gain in terms of favours from the West, but the Russian national elite, as opposed to the oligarchs, considers that it is threatened by modern capitalist forms—most particularly finance capital—and find it hard to accept that its former spheres of influence are being hijacked by the West. The USSR was run as one economy and Moscow still prefers to maintain that form. This question is discussed in the article by Hillel Ticktin in this issue.

The real point is that modern capitalism needs an enemy in order to provide an excuse to build up the military sector and supply an imperative to make workers accept the political economic system. The end of the Cold War has created a vacuum which the authorities are finding hard to fill. At the same time, economic and financial journalists are warning of a downturn which might run out of control. The present upturn is largely due to the war on terror and in Iraq. The US cannot maintain that level of expenditure and the US population is unlikely to accept the present level of soldiers killed and injured for much longer. That probably also rules out future wars for some time to come. While no one can predict when the next downturn will come or whether it will run out of control, the future has not been so dark or uncertain for a very long time.