

# Political Consciousness and its Conditions at the Present Time

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*This article outlines a series of contemporary elements which are part of modern political consciousness and which prevent a movement to socialism. Despair, cynicism, hedonism and acceptance of the least worst alternative are among the prevailing forms of consciousness. Whereas most people are discontented with their lot, owing to the high levels of stress, insecurity, low standard of living, relative and absolute dependence on the person and country, and their general lack of control over their conditions of work as well as their future, not to speak of the society itself, the overall attitude is one of formal acceptance. As they cannot see a way out, most people try to make their life as comfortable as possible. In desperation they turn to whatever appears to offer hope: nationalism, often of a xenophobic type, anti-semitism, religion and an authoritarian state. The question is why they do not turn against the real cause of their misery—the socio-economic system itself—as they have done in the past. The answer lies in the role of Stalinism and its ultimate failure, the many betrayals of social democracy, the difficulty in understanding the complexity of a world in transition and the poverty of the real left, which has yet to come to terms with the past and its tasks for the future.*

*Keywords: Ideology; Commodity Fetishism; Consciousness; Collectivity; Class; Stalinism*

## On Consciousness and Collectivity

It is usual among Marxists to make a distinction between a consciousness which reflects or corresponds to reality and one which does not, termed an ideology, seen therefore as a false consciousness. In other words, it is argued that humankind hides reality from itself. However, it takes a class form, in that the dominant ideology is that of the ruling class, which does not want to understand the real relationships in society, as opposed to manipulating them in its own interest. Class consciousness for the working class is therefore the real understanding of its position as the class which supplies the necessary and surplus labour in the society. It therefore leads to its comprehension of its position as the universal class that is in capitalism but not of capitalism and so the emancipator of all society. I am defining workers as all those

who sell their labour power, unless, like managers, they also control labour power, in which case they are in an ambiguous position. Stalinists often seemed to argue that only those engaged in productive labour are workers but there is no justification within Marxism for this viewpoint.

The term class, here, refers to a collectivity. Workers are not automatically a class just because they sell their labour power. The latter is the Stalinist position which simply argues that the structural position in relation to the means of production determines everything. Stalinism adopted a bastardized form of Bogdanov's proletcult so that it professed to worship the worker as working in production, while in reality subjecting workers to draconian rules and controls in their name. Marx<sup>1</sup> makes it very clear that workers only constitute a class when they are a collectivity. The collectivity has to come into existence objectively, and the subjective consciousness of the worker itself forms and is formed by that collectivity.<sup>2</sup> A worker will only be politically consciousness when that worker has understood the universal nature of the class mission to go beyond nation and class and emancipate all of humankind.

### **Transparency and Ideology: Contrast with Feudalism and Stalinism**

In earlier times, religion provided an explanation of both society and nature. A religion which justified the status quo on the grounds that the future world was better—'render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's' and 'it will be easier for a rich man to get into heaven than a camel get through an eye of a needle' had three useful features. The first was that it was eternal and apparently beyond control, the second was that it could, none the less be altered to suit those controlling the religion, as the status quo changed, and the third was that those who were exploited could be rendered quiescent by the rewards to come and the implicit contempt of the rich.

Under feudalism people project their lack of control over nature and their exploitation onto a mythical world. They reject the world in which they live in favour of a Utopian after life. Under conditions of direct dependency, physical isolation and lack of knowledge buttressed by uncertainty and change—albeit slow change—religion provides a secure point from which to understand the world. This is made all the easier by the existence of a religious bureaucracy which supports the hierarchical feudal relations of direct dependency. Social relations are religious relations. Ideology is crucial in maintaining the system.

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<sup>1</sup> 'In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence, that separate their mode of life, their interests and their cultural formation from those of the other classes, and bring them into conflict with those classes, they form a class. In so far as these small peasant proprietors are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or a political organisation, they do not form a class.' Karl Marx, *18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Surveys from Exile (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 239.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed argument see H. Ticktin, 'The Political Economy of Class in the Transitional Epoch', *Critique*, 20–21 (1987).

The problem with the religious form is that it is open to anyone to understand that it is an ideology or false consciousness. Putting it another way, anyone with knowledge could understand its essential falsity, particularly as non-feudal religions remained. That is why other religions were proscribed. The ‘totalitarian nature’ of feudal religion was essential, as it prescribed a mode of life from above. The domination of landowners and bureaucrats needs more than a religious form, although such a religious form cements that exploitation and so helps turn that domination into a mode of production. Religion could only operate hand in hand with direct force in feudalism. Such a form required inquisitions, proscriptions, witch hunts and ghettos, particularly when it was embryonic and in dissolution. Censorship, enforcement of dogmatic ideas and limitations on relations with unbelievers were all forms of force which were essential to the maintenance of the feudal ideology. Equally, the fact that the world was changing, the means of production were developing and knowledge had gone far beyond the old ideology falsified the old religious picture.

In other words, the fact that the ideology was either manufactured or interpreted by a particular group in the society was a clear weakness in that it conflicted with the message that the doctrine was divine and eternal. The close identity of the religious bureaucracy with the feudal landlords tended to break the religious veil. Hence force had to be omnipresent to supplement religion as a means of control over the serfs.

It is noteworthy that when feudalism was in decline, a new variant of religion played a crucial role in maintaining control, even as the old religion was losing its potency. Anti-semitism, the Inquisition, the crusades and the rise of Protestantism are all testament to its decline and to its supersession.

In contrast, capitalism is unique in having a form—commodity fetishism—which directly provides the ideology for the control of the working class. Force remains in the background, used only when commodity fetishism has broken down. In other words, capitalism is not transparent, unlike feudalism. Capitalism as Marx puts it, is a system of apparent independence.<sup>3</sup> The worker is atomised, competing to sell commodity labour power, and capital appears as an alien independent force which hires the worker’s labour power for a money wage. Labour has formal equality with capital: the worker needs money to survive and gets the money by selling labour power, just as capital supplies the money to get the job done. Under feudalism and under Stalinism it is all apparently personal but under capitalism it does not appear personal. The indirectness of the dependency, the existence of the money relation, gives the worker a formal equality and a degree of real independence of the employer, impossible under feudalism or slavery.

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 163. In the money relation, in the developed system of exchange (and this semblance seduces the democrats), the ties of personal dependence, of distinctions of blood, education, etc. are, in fact, exploded, ripped up (at least, personal ties all appear as *personal* relations); and individuals *seem* independent (this is an independence which is at bottom merely an illusion and it is more correctly called indifference).

Stalinism is another contrast in that it was transparent and hence force was absolutely critical to its stability. The absence of real money, as opposed to formal money, meant that the system returned to one of direct dependence. The atomisation was not induced by the money relation but through the system of all-pervading control.<sup>4</sup> While not a mode of production it was an unviable system of its own kind, in which the suffocating all-embracing role of the state, and the unprecedented and unique form of atomisation, was essential to its survival. While the worker had no choice but to perceive the system of direct dependency and so the hierarchical and unequal social relations, the entire activity of the state was directed at preventing the formation of a class and class consciousness. Only as the state began to break down could workers begin to act as workers. Then, however, the Stalinists employed their one trump card: their destruction of the theory of the working class. Marxism appeared as a failed totalitarian ideology, which even if it were correct could only lead to war, famine, permanent economic shortage and general destruction. After 60 years of 'education' in so-called Marxism–Leninism, few, if any, could distinguish between Marxism, the theory of the self-emancipation of the working class, and Stalinism, the doctrine of a ruling group controlling and exploiting workers in an economy based on nationalised industry, administered by that ruling group.

Ideology under capitalism automatically flows from an immediate reading of reality. Equality before the law seems to guarantee real equality in life. Workers can only get a level of wages which allows the firm to be competitive. For that it must make an average rate of profit or more.

To sum up, only under capitalism are workers apparently free. Under feudalism and Stalinism force was open and apparent, while the former relied on ignorance and despair leading to religion, the latter used atomisation and an unprecedented and an unrepeatable degree of force, combined with the apparent destruction of an alternative. Marxists have often made this point in different ways, though they have often been shy of dealing with Stalinism. There can be no question but that workers, by hand and by brain, are freer in every sense in capitalism when compared with Stalinism, let alone feudalism. As the contemporary scene still has Stalinist-type countries—even though they are evolving—and much of the Third World has feudal legacies—even if they are capitalist—the point has particular force today.

### **Consciousness Under Capitalism**

This difference is absolutely crucial in understanding consciousness under capitalism. The law of value is the fundamental law of motion of capitalism. Value transforms itself through money into self-expanding value or capital which then becomes the overarching imperative of capitalism. The phenomenal form of value is the commodity. Value controls, value dominates and value possesses through the commodity. Labour power becomes a commodity and so is subsumed into the overall

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<sup>4</sup> Ticktin, 'The Political Economy of Class', *op. cit.*

value process. Labour becomes abstract labour—labour which is subject to an inexorable process of homogenisation. The worker is proletarianised. The ideology of commodity fetishism is the subjective side of the objectivisation of labour. Because the workers are controlled through the dynamic of capital accumulation, which is self-activating, they perceive the process itself as necessary, natural and eternal.

Marx argued that ruling class ideology was dominant at any particular time, except at the time of revolution. Since the 19th century, however, we no longer have a simple ruling class ideology. The ideology of mature capitalism is commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism, however, has been sufficiently penetrated and exposed to require considerable supplements both materially and ideologically. These patches on the commodity fetishism quilt are limited and well known: nationalism, ethnic prejudice including racism and anti-semitism, and sexism. Whereas these aspects of modern ideology were crucial in destroying the 2nd International and permitting the First World War, Stalinism, in association with nationalism was critical in preventing any profound understanding of the capitalist, let alone the Stalinist, world. Commodity fetishism atomises the worker before ‘eternally dominant’ capital. Racism, nationalism, sexism are modes of division of workers into warring groups divided by ethnic group, region, country, gender, level of skill or other invented concept.

Until the Russian Revolution, Marxists took it for granted that the changes in objective circumstances would gradually and then ultimately trigger a change in consciousness. The socialisation of production would lead to a socialist consciousness and the process of class struggle would be crucial in that development. There might be ups and downs but the direction was clear. The very formation of value producing abstract labour meant the homogenisation and interdependence of the workers and the formation of a potential collectivity or class. The potential, however, had to become actual and this needed a change or break in the system.

This seemed to imply that the system had to break down or at least perform so badly that the workers revolted. Of course, no Marxist, who was a Marxist and not an anarchist, ever accepted the Bakuninist doctrine of the worse the better, even though illiterate anti-Marxists have often made such accusations. It is true, of course, that a catastrophist viewpoint sometimes underlies the doctrines of some simplistic left wing groups who are desperate to end the period in which they have been waiting for the working class to act, but that does not make it Marxist.

There is, in fact, a gap in the Marxist literature at this point. No one has discussed in any detail under what circumstances the workers become a class and take power. Marx argues only that all aspects of the worker must unite, public and private, in production and in consumption, at work and at home, men and women. In other words, there has to be a real objective unity combined with a subjective unity. The subjectivity of the potential class is expected to follow its objective situation, even though its consciousness would interact with its objective position helping to move one way or another. Trotsky talked first of the working class acting after a downturn followed by an upturn, as in the French Revolution. Later he changed the argument

and took the view that the working class acts after several episodes of this kind, where their material position got better and then worse. He does not explain how or why they would then act.

The replacement of the capitalist class by the working class cannot take place as a simple result of a particular failure of the capitalist system, whether through war or through a depression, because socialism is a new world system and the working class must be aware of the nature of the change, and not just be disgruntled or desperate. There has to be a widespread acceptance of the concept of socialism itself both in theory and in practice. The latter implies that the population must be in the process of destroying the old forms of rule, by establishing ways of controlling the system from below. The former requires a widespread education in the nature of the capitalist system and its successor socialism.

These conditions require both that capitalism be seen as inferior to and replaceable by socialism as a result of experience over time and that the ideas of Marxism be widely understood and accepted. In turn, workers need sufficient self-confidence and hope, acquired also over a period of time, for them to see an alternative as real. Without intellectuals counteracting the dominant ideology, demolishing the excuses for the real failures of capitalism and providing a theory for change, the necessary education in the natures of capitalism and socialism will be absent.

It is crystal clear that such conditions are totally absent at the present time. The question is why.

### **Why?**

Marx and the earlier Marxists were correct in their view that being determines consciousness and, therefore, that while ideology is a false consciousness it is based on a distorted reality not just a distortion of that reality. Lenin argued that it was imperialism which formed 'the aristocracy of labour' and that view came to be more generally accepted as a reason why the working class in Europe became nationalist. Others went further than Lenin and pointed out that in the USA and the UK a wedge was driven between economic and political consciousness, precisely because of the imperial role of the working class of those countries. The legacy of imperialism clearly remains, even if colonialism is no longer what it was. However, the working class situation has changed rapidly over the last century given the wars, revolutions, migrations, depressions and repressions, which have made these objective influences both complex and specific to countries and regions.

The classic argument, then, is that imperialism changes the nature of the working class situation in the imperial countries in three ways. In the first instance it divides skilled workers from the rest; in the second place, material concessions strung out over time lead to the successful emergence of trade unions which help to foster an economic and apolitical consciousness; thirdly the improved more general circumstances, weaker downturns and longer upturns strengthen the economic and nationalist consciousness of the whole population.

These influences are still at work but in a new form with counter-influences. The end of colonialism and the consequent reduction of the flow of super profits from the colonies has clearly limited this form of incorporation of workers in Europe. At the same time, the flow is quite clearly continuing. The fact that some 500 billion dollars is sent illegally alone from the underdeveloped and transition countries to the developed countries each year by the local bourgeoisie and ‘middle class’ give some idea of part of the flow.<sup>5</sup> Yet, even when one adds in the relatively higher payments for technology and machinery compared to raw materials etc. and other legal flows, these figures are more limited than the flow of some 10% of GDP flowing into the UK before 1914. The argument applies most strongly to the overall imperialist power—the United States—and is brought out by the well-known fact that the United States receives more for its investment overseas than investors get for their investments in the United States.<sup>6</sup> This is allowing the United States to run its huge balance of payments deficit for longer than would otherwise have been possible.

None the less, the events in New Orleans brought out starkly (more so than even Barbara Ehrenreich’s book on female working class poverty in the United States) that a considerable number of people in the United States live at third world levels.<sup>7</sup> When one notes first that the number of hours worked in the United States is well above those worked in Europe; secondly, that there are considerable problems with pensions and health provision; and, thirdly, that the minimum wage is absurdly low, it is hard to speak of the whole population being better off through imperialism. Instead, observers have noted the importance of racism and layers of immigrants as well as the depressed conditions of immigrants, particularly the millions of illegal immigrants. *Mutatis mutandis* the same argument applies to the western European countries.

It is, however, the absence of any real class consciousness among the long-term employed workers that is the real question. In the UK there has been a long history of a national economic class consciousness and the US trade unions also reflect that aspect, however dimly. While one can argue that in the period down to 1973 or so, imperial tribute played an important role in the economy, that is less true today, as argued above and hence it is not a sufficient explanation, although it is certainly part of any such argument.

### **Propaganda and Divisions in the Working Class**

The usual argument for workers’ absence of political commitment rests on four points: the control of the media and education, the nature of parliamentary-type

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond W. Baker, *Capitalism’s Achilles Heel* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005), p. 257: ‘Of the \$500 billion a year in illicit proceeds that I estimate pass annually from developing and transitional economies into western accounts’.

<sup>6</sup> Ricardo Hausmann and Federico Sturzenegger, “‘Dark matter’ Makes the US Deficit Disappear”, *Financial Times*, 8 December 2005, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: Undercover in Low-wage USA* (London: Granta Books, 2002).

democracy and the use of money to advertise political parties or political candidates, consumerism and divisions among workers themselves.

While no one can deny the importance of the first three forces, they are insufficient to explain the relative quiescence of workers today. After all, education and the media were controlled by the ruling group in the USSR and no other viewpoint was allowed. Yet, very few supported the system as became very apparent when the Soviet Union ended. Marxism, Marxism–Leninism, Stalinism were all regarded with absolute contempt. When everyday life conflicts with propaganda, the latter ceases to convince. That is true of a modern capitalism in which exploitation is much less opaque than it was.

The whole nature of a two party system in which the two parties differ little and compete with one another to propose populist solutions, which inevitably turn out to be anti-worker solutions, breeds contempt for the operation with the system, while at the same time fostering despair with the alternative, usually portrayed and understood as anti-democratic and so worse. This throws the argument back to the nature of the alternative.

It will not be argued that these approaches are so much wrong as looking at a secondary aspect of reality. They play a role but only because there are forces even more powerful as implied above. Commodities govern our lives and the commoditisation of labour power inevitably permits an ideology which contrasts that commoditisation with the pursuit of a commoditised leisure. Whereas Marx counterposed a society in which work becomes humankind's prime want, modern welfare capitalism poses the question of unlimited leisure time in which shopping, holidays, sport and the beach beckon. Social democratic parties prefer to accept the demands implicit in such a consciousness and so join with their slightly more conservative political opponents. Given that this is the governing viewpoint, it may not be surprising that modern west European young workers should turn to hedonism as the only realism.

There are two questions posed by this hedonistic, or consumerist, attitude. One is how to deal with it on a simple everyday basis. The other is to explain its nature, and its limits. Works like that of Naomi Klein do a good job in exposing the subjection of ordinary people to the superficiality of everyday capitalism.<sup>8</sup> The upsurge in activity around globalisation, Third World debt and global control through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank shows how the suffering of the majority of the people of the world necessarily preys on the conscience of those who are themselves hedonistic. The immediate pleasure of the one stands starkly opposed to the urgent distress of the other. There are obvious and inherent limits of this stage of modern consciousness, but they have yet to be theorised.

The question, however, is when this social conscience will go beyond demonstrations to the realisation that the struggle for a new society is long and hard and indeed the only real solution. When will the demonstrators listen to those of

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<sup>8</sup> Naomi Klein, *No Logo, No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (London: Flamingo, 2000).



their number who argue that it is only the strength, power and dynamic of the working class that can change society? However, the demonstrations themselves and the more general societal disapproval of hedonism show that the shift to consumerism, mass drug taking etc. is itself something that young workers, youth in general and the bored 'middle class' adopt through lack of any alternative. Parents, the supposedly older and wiser stalwarts of society are cynical and contemptuous of all political and economic institutions, even as they uphold them. In earlier times, a century ago, students, peasants and workers turned to the left as a whole in not a few countries. In the 1970s, there was a similar rise in youth militancy, but it was not as extensive as earlier. In reality, the hedonistic attitudes are the obverse side of a real despair in the whole of modern society. And it is the despair that has to be explained.

This links to a more general question on the formation of the class itself, of which class consciousness is a part, raised earlier. The objective conditions for that collectivity have also to exist. It is the lack of these that have also furnished reasons for the absence of a working class political consciousness today. Today, however, we may point to five major economic forms of division. There is the difference between the positions of workers in the imperialist countries and the Third World, that between skilled and unskilled workers, between white collar workers and blue collar workers, between one sector and another, between the employed and unemployed and finally between the exploited and superexploited workers, usually on the basis of racism. There are, of course, many other differences, such as those based on ethnic and gender divisions, but they have usually coincided, at least partially, with economic divisions such as sectoral differences, where for instance women have worse conditions and are worse paid. Historically, various socialists and anti-socialists have stressed one or more of these divisions to downplay the role of the workers as a class. Eduard Bernstein pointed to the growth of a 'middle class', who are essentially white collar workers, feminists have argued for a separate women's struggle, anarchists have supported the marginalised and unemployed, etc. No one can deny that these divisions have played an important role in preventing the class coming into existence, most particularly when these divisions were made to coincide with ethnic or religious divisions.

Nevertheless, it is in the nature of capital itself that it needs a homogeneous and flexible workforce and such divisions are costly and inefficient. As a result they are only allowed to play a role, for any length of time, when capitalism itself is threatened. At other times, the process of the formation of abstract labour continues its inexorable process. Today the particular contemporary form of that process is given terms such as globalisation and neo-liberalism. A particular example in that process is shown by the present way in which the whole work force in the universities in the UK are being put into one giant scale from janitor through professors to the administrators. Professionals, such as lawyers, teachers, academics, doctors, are all being subjected to a process of proletarianisation.

In other words, far from the working class being at an end, it has never been so all-embracing as today. To the extent that these divisions are lessening, so too the formation of the class becomes easier.

None the less, there is no question that nationalism and various other ethnic 'isms' have been crucial in preventing class solidarity or class action in the past two decades.

The preceding discussion outlines the reasons why workers are in a position to form a class. In short, the dominant ideology—commodity fetishism—is permeable and socialisation and so proletarianisation is continuing. There has to be another force or forces that prevent the class coming into being and reference has already been made to the real despair which, in the author's view, is felt the world over.

### **Present-day Reality: Reasons for Being Non-political**

In the first place, the bourgeoisie has learned how to make real concessions, even if they were often temporary, but secondly also to slander and libel their opponents. Bourgeois political parties routinely lie, using euphemisms for their Machiavellian practices. The whole educational and intellectual apparatus of the bourgeois state uses every trick in the book to avoid telling the truth about the past and present. At a time when the US government is openly using torture, university authors continue to churn out books berating Lenin and Trotsky for actions they either never committed or never condoned. The fact that they and the Bolsheviks were people who had selflessly devoted their lives to changing society for the better, without reward but much suffering, is turned into its opposite. (The question of Stalinism is discussed below, and is fundamental but not the issue here.) The point made here is that any attempt at overthrowing or even protesting against capitalism is so distorted that the working class cannot know its own history.

There is also a major problem arising out of the social democratic concessions made by the system to the workers. Instead of conceding real power to workers, the ruling class gave, *inter alia*, a limited degree of control to trade unions. This included for a time some control over the workplace, as well as the right to be consulted over hiring and firing. Nationalised industries tended to protect workers. The effect in social democracy was to dichotomise workers between their lives as producers and their lives as consumers, as goods were then generally more expensive, scarcer and sometimes faulty. The market necessarily malfunctions when the law of value is not allowed to operate in its essential form.

When the social democratic state came under attack, much of the left defended the indefensible. Poor quality production cannot be defended. Even worse was the closed shop, where only those accepted by the union could be employed, and in a number of well-known cases it was openly nationalist and racist. The anti-immigrant and racist attitudes taken by sections of the working class are the price of the acceptance of social democratic reformism. Each social democratic state adopted a variant of 'social democracy in one country', providing welfare benefits only for its citizens and not for the millions of workers and peasants in its empire. Unfortunately, the left then tended

to eternalise these forms rather than rejecting them. Instead they demanded that they be retained, so falling into the trap not only of defending social democracy, with all its concessions to reactionary populism, but also supporting a form which had outlasted its life within capitalism. The fact is that nationalised industries are contradictory entities within capitalism, but they have to operate within the market with all its consequences. The same applies to the operation of trade unions.

The result is an unholy muddle among workers and within the left. The optimism of the victories, using short-termist demands, when supporting workers in struggle have been eclipsed by a longer-term despair as these struggles have eventually led only to a stalemate at best, if not to actual, if partial, defeats. As the left has found socialist education and socialist slogans incomprehensible or despised, it has preferred a reformist tactic and strategy, comforting itself that this is the first step to socialist change. In reality, they have only reinforced an acceptance of capitalism. Over 100 years ago, Lenin, in *What is to be done*, vituperatively opposed the idea of trade union, or economic struggles, leading to socialism. At that time, in the Russian Empire, trade unions played a minor role among workers, but that is not the case in most countries today.

The failure of the left was understandable in that the period of Stalinist dominance effectively doomed any genuinely socialist struggle.

Given this context, the inevitable and frequent mistakes of the left and the argument that the established political parties are realists, the working class has often preferred the easier choice of immediate concessions. The fact that these concessions have often turned out to be very different from their initial prospectus has made people cynical of all politicians but it has not turned the mass of the working class to the left yet and that has also to be explained. This phenomenon is global, applying both to the developed and underdeveloped world.

Thirdly, in some countries, the choice has been far more agonising. Given the potential terror of the bourgeoisie, shown many times over from the time of the Paris Commune down to the mass killings of the Argentinian Generals, workers have preferred to survive or at least have a quiet if hard life. The threat of an authoritarian state in the wings remains real. Even now the rise and rise of semi-Fascist parties such as those of Le Pen and Haider, in Europe, causes a shudder to run through the left. This aspect cannot be underestimated. The situation of ordinary people is often desperate and a revolution can often make that situation worse because the ruling class wreaks vengeance on its foes. It launches wars, trade boycotts, investment withdrawal or the destruction of assets and the assassination of socialist leaders. The consequent destruction of the flower of the working class and the death and defection of many pro-socialist intellectuals make the transition period a nightmare. The revolutionary government has to explain why an already desperate situation has become monstrous and without its best cadres, who have been eliminated. In other words, people in many countries are well aware of the real possibility that any revolutionary change will worsen their conditions for a time and even for their lifetimes. They have experienced ruling class vengeance directly or indirectly. This is

particularly the case in ex-Stalinist countries but also in many parts of the Third World, such as Indonesia and Latin America.

Linked to the third argument, is fourthly, and crucially, the terrible suffering of workers in the territories of the former Russian Empire, from the time of the Civil War down to the present day, has prevented any new revolution and also acted as a deterrent to any other working class.

Today, indeed, the main burden on the conscience of the working class is that of the terrible defeat suffered in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Marxism has yet to be salvaged from the effects of the mass killing of the old Bolsheviks and the rest of the left, the atomisation of the Soviet working class and the destruction of Marxism, in the name of Marxism. In the former Soviet Union many workers have lost all hope of socialism. It appears as a failed or Utopian doctrine. If socialism in one country has been proved a failure, workers ask why they should have to suffer yet again in order once more to begin the process of world revolution.

When these four points are combined together, it becomes hard to see why anyone would turn to the left. The whole apparatus of propaganda stresses time and again the cruelty of the Bolsheviks, beginning with Lenin, and continuing in an amplified form under Stalin and his successors. Writers then argue that any attempt at a better society is Utopian and that the very act of trying to change society leads to violence, massacres, concentration camps and millions of deaths. The end of the Soviet Union itself is falsified. It is argued that it ended because socialism is inefficient and so collapsed under its own weight when given a shove by the wise leaders of the United States and the UK. Stalinism was inefficient but it was never socialist, as any honest person, let alone scholar or writer, ought to recognise. It did not end because Reagan adopted a stronger anti-USSR policy, but because the Soviet elite wanted it to end, given that the system was unviable and they expected to do well out of converting to capitalism and, indeed, they have done extremely well out of the conversion of the USSR. None the less, this message is drowned out in the messages propagated by the mass media. This would appear to give the mass media and education the central role in preventing the emergence of a left wing understanding of reality, but that is only true because there appears to be no answer to the points that socialism is Utopian, inefficient and murderous, if not in intention then in outcome. Stalinism has discredited both the personnel and the message, leaving a vacuum.

Capitalism declared itself triumphant with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the victory of Yeltsin two years later. Lenin became a monster who gave birth to a supermonster—Stalin. Trotsky was not a monster but only because he did not have the opportunity. The self-sacrifice of Marxists is seen as fanaticism and their doctrines are regarded as extremist and inhuman. The famous words of Levine, when on trial for his life for the revolution in Bavaria in 1919: ‘we Communists are dead men on leave’, have acquired a new contempt with the self-sacrifice of the Islamic terrorists of 11 September. Stalinism turned everything on its head but triumphant capitalism went further and induced a feeling of derision.

## **The Legacy of Stalinism and Social Democracy**

The period from the defeat of the left opposition down to the fall of the Soviet Union can be called, for the purposes of this essay, the Stalinist period. During this period Stalinism dominated the left and working class consciousness. Its dogmas and fantasies, not to speak of its criminal accusations, were the everyday bedrock of left thought. Everyone else on the left was marginalized. Social democracy, which progressively attenuated its socialist demands over the period, gradually became dependent on the Stalinists for its own existence.

This last period continues to dominate the thinking both of the working class, in its potentiality, and of the left itself. Stalinists, pseudo-Stalinists and bureaucratic leftists accused those critical of the USSR of being agents of various secret services. Within the left, the siege atmosphere led to parallel absurdities where such accusations were taken seriously and new variations were found, where members of organisations were accused of being agents of the KGB or GPU. The accusers have seldom recanted but have instead retired into an embittered silence. Unfortunately, those who have been through such organisations have often drawn the wrong lessons. Instead of seeing the atmosphere for what it was, they have burnt their shirts and beaten their breasts, all the while shouting that they were determined to absolve themselves of their guilt by re-interpreting history in the light of the importance of civil rights.

In the 20th century the chain of capitalist control has been challenged more than once. Lenin spoke of breaking the chain at its weakest link but the chain reconstituted itself. His analogy has not proven to be correct. Capitalism was overthrown in the Russian empire and its overthrow altered world capitalism forever but world capitalism was not overthrown. The Russian Revolution was an epoch-making event which severely and permanently damaged the foundations of the capitalist structure but capitalism survived in an altered form. It is probably more true to compare the Russian Revolution to an earthquake which irreparably damaged the foundations of the capitalist edifice. It has been shored up but only by abandoning parts of the building and by cannibalising parts of the rest. Capitalism cannot be irreversibly overthrown until its foundations are destroyed, but they have been irreversibly weakened and capitalism is in a different form from what it was.

Whereas the Leninist analogy produced an all or nothing result—either the chain was broken or it was not—the metaphor of a damaged building allows one to understand that capitalism is continuing but in an altered form. Lenin's analogy is really political rather than socio-economic and, as a purely political device, he was not incorrect. The point, however, is that in the Leninist metaphor the analysis is stark and clear. In the analogy of the building the consequences are not so clear. In other words, the capitalist chain was broken and that meant that capitalist control and the world market were limited. Workers and intellectuals could see the result. And yet, Stalinism and social democracy restored capitalist control by acting as its partners in restraining or even destroying working class organisations. That, however,

has not been so evident. The press, school and university education have ignored this aspect of reality. Indeed they have so distorted the nature of Stalinism, the nature of the Russian Revolution, the nature of the Soviet Union and the parties that have fought capitalism that very few can understand what really happened in the past and so what exists today.

### **The Complexity of the Present**

As if this was not difficult enough, there is an even more complex reality standing behind these problems, which is the real reason why many cannot understand the present, given the nature of education and the media. Capitalism is in decline, where decline is defined in terms of the increasing difficulty of finding mediating forms between the poles of the contradiction forming value and so capital.<sup>9</sup> In other words, capitalism has found it increasingly difficult to sustain the system and consequently resorted to political and economic forms which compromise and even threaten the system itself. Imperialism, wars, great and small, fascism and various other forms of authoritarian rule, and the welfare state are such forms. The decline of capital necessarily involves the decline of value and so the market itself. The resulting conflict between the market and administrative forms takes on a fetishised form in which it appears that efficient private enterprise is fighting bureaucracy. Neither war nor the welfare state can be intuitively perceived as forms of decline. Indeed they may be trumpeted as signs of strength.

The overthrow of capitalism in 1917 ushered in a transitional period as Trotsky put it. It has hitherto been a period where both subjectively and objectively transitional forms have come into existence. Parties, theory and masses of literature have been dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism. Revolutions and attempted revolutions in the name of socialism have been numerous. Only the earliest were genuinely socialist but even nationalist uprisings in the name of socialism have destabilised capitalism without bringing socialism nearer. An abortive form of overthrow such as Stalinism is part of the transitional period. Indeed one might have anticipated, with Jack London, that the initial attempts to overthrow capitalism and replace it with socialism would be unsuccessful. The result is not a pristine capitalist world but one in which various abortive forms have come into existence.

From the point of view of conscious workers, the situation becomes highly complex in that they have to disentangle the laws of capitalism, the laws of its decline and the laws of the transitional period. Worse still, all three aspects are shrouded in obfusatory ideology such that it is difficult even to discern the fact that we are living in such a complex period.

The consciousness of the majority of humankind has been grossly distorted by the tendentious, prejudiced and venal descriptive analysis of the October Revolution and

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of decline see H. Ticktin, 'The Nature of an Epoch of Declining Capitalism', *Critique*, 26 (1993), pp. 69–93.

its aftermath by journalists, academics and politicians. It simply does not pay academics in the West to produce an objective and true analysis of that event. For a very long time, Stalinist-type interpretations held sway in the left. Today right wing anti-socialist academics, such as Pipes and Figs who are dominant on the right, are also influential directly and indirectly in much of what passes for a left. Stalinist accounts, however, are still believed.

## Despair

Considering the difficulty of understanding modern political economy, the nature of the subjective and objective concessions made through the welfare state, the fear of bourgeois revenge and real history of Stalinism, has led many to despair of any real change. It is this despair that is the foundation of contemporary nationalism, religious fundamentalism and the relatively more benign politics of identity, greenery and post-modernism, even if the participants do not understand it.

In the countries with parliamentary-type democracies, despair at the failure of the political system has led people to turn to cynicism, the drink/drug culture and, in the US, to religion. Commentators in the US wonder why workers have turned to the right of the right wing parties, which stand for family values. It is not, however, difficult to see that it is the same reason why Russians support Putin, even though he has raised utility and transport prices and rents and *de facto* cut pensions. In a society where the only certainty is uncertainty and where change is constant, the institutions, parties and rulers who promise a modicum of stability and security receive support, as an island of temporary hope in a sea of despair.

The most desperate have turned to riots, armed uprisings and assorted crazy actions. Where the population is in despair there is always the opportunity for movements based on the lumpen elements or the petite bourgeoisie or both to put themselves forward. Nationalism and racism have played appalling roles in this regard. The slaughter in Bosnia, Tajikistan, Rwanda and Congo are examples where the populations have turned on their neighbours in an atmosphere where the future appeared abysmal.

Where a mode of production is in decline, writers who do not understand the process produce dirge like literature. Today, there is an outpouring of works on the increasing scarcity of resources, the heating up of the planet, Malthusian mutterings on the growth of population, possible nuclear warfare, rampant disease and comparisons with civilisations which have disappeared. The fact is that a rational, planned society could deal with all these questions, in so far as they are problems, by a diversion of resources away from the wasteful economic forms today based on profit and warfare and use those resources to combat disease, climate change etc. Since it is obvious, for instance that pharmaceutical companies have no interest in producing cures for diseases which then no longer exist, most people have some idea of the potentialities. The discussion, then, has to be diverted away to a form of a natural

evolution, which might overwhelm humankind and, by no coincidence, this fits in with the more general atmosphere of despair.

### **Whom the Gods Would Destroy . . .**

The further we are from the end of the Cold War, the greater the potentiality for a positive change in consciousness. This is so for two reasons. In the first place the political and economic forms of stability provided by the Cold War are gradually vanishing. This aspect has been discussed in previous issues of this and other journals. In the second place, understanding of reality is less distorted by that period.

At the same time, as argued above, so-called globalisation is integrating economies both inside those entities and among them. Proletarianisation is proceeding apace and divisions in the workforce are diminishing. Parliamentary democracy is clearly cracking, as many observers have noted. Imperial US dominance is in rapid decline. At the same time, civil rights are diminishing and states are assuming more authoritarian forms. The welfare state has been reduced in scope everywhere. The situation for many in the Third World remains intolerable.

If the workers find it hard to understand the modern world, the contemporary bourgeoisie and its governments are no different. Their actions have become irrational in the sense that they are pursuing short-term policies which conflict with their long-term interests. Indeed it is not clear that they understand their long-term interests today. In the United States the failures of the Iraq War and of the New Orleans non-rescue demonstrate the incapacity of the government to deal with issues which they might have solved easily 40 years ago. If the ideological lunacy of the US government is patent, that in the UK is suicidal. Ross McKibben writes: 'This is the most intensely ideological government we have known in more than a hundred years. The model of market-managerialism has largely destroyed all alternatives, traditional and untraditional. Its most powerful weapon is its vocabulary.'<sup>10</sup> The fact is that New Labour in the UK has failed by any standard and its chief proponent, Blair, is highly unpopular. The real point, however, is that the failure of this doctrine was inevitable and it has wiped the slate clean. Having correctly attacked the mixed economy as a failure, the concept of the totally marketised economy has also failed. Socialism, the society consciously controlled from below, automatically re-appears.

Michael Portillo, the former Conservative Minister of Defence, has already called Blair 'unhinged'.<sup>11</sup> The actions of Bush–Cheney are not dissimilar. The end of the Cold War has had a series of negative consequences for the ruling class. In this connection it has meant that they have lost both their unity and their rationale. The

<sup>10</sup> Ross McKibben, 'The Destruction of the Public Sphere', *London Review of Books*, 6 January 2006, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Article by Michael Portillo on Blair unhinged for *The Sunday Times*, 20 November 2005: 'I fear that the Prime Minister has become unhinged. He has always tended towards being Messianic. Now he is more convinced than ever that he is right and everyone else wrong. Neither the views of Parliament nor the Home Secretary count for anything. He courts unpopularity, outrages his supporters and has lost his instinct for survival. Logic plays little part in his calculations and economics none.'



anti-communist doctrine which they espoused had a kernel of truth to it. The present-day ideology of the market has been reduced to the concept of the dominance of money, which in itself supposedly breeds money and breathes efficiency. Everything must make money. The needs-based sectors, such as education, health, civil service, the army, the police, are all subjected to it, with the production of an almighty muddle. The result is the opposite of what was intended: massive inefficiency. The very instability of the system drives the government to war and other counterproductive measures, without the politicians understanding their own motives.

The bourgeoisie does not know which way it is going. It does not see that it is in decline but is so deceived by the end of the Soviet Union that it believes that it is dominant as never before. First they argued that there was a new paradigm of high growth. That ended with the March 2000 downturn. Now the enormous military power of the United States serves the same purpose in arguing that the US is the guardian of a democratic and benevolent capitalism. 'Those whom the Gods would destroy they first make mad'. When a mode of production is in decline and the ruling class is in denial, its representatives tend to be less perspicacious, less learned, more opportunist and more venal because it does not pay anyone else to be in that position and because there is no real solution to the problems of the day. Such government personnel then find that their policies turn into their opposites and in desperation they take steps perceived by others as mad. The leaders of many present-day countries appear similar, from Berlusconi in Italy to Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Some Presidents/prime ministers are more cautious and some more intelligent but all are subject to the same pressures.

The nonsense and the essential insanity of present-day establishment discourse provides the left with an opportunity that it has not had for a very long time. Inevitably, true intellectuals will be forced to the left, while genuine Marxists will find an audience formerly closed to them. Whereas, for a long time after the Stalinist defeat of the Russian Revolution, the ruling class was better organised with a clearer consciousness than the working class and its parties, today that is changing.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from the above analysis that workers will never become a class without two features particularly necessary at the present time. The first is the requirement for a theory to understand the present and the second is the need for an organisational form to provide the ability to take power. In the past workers have thrown up a number of forms of self-organisation from trade unions to workers councils. Thus far all these forms have been corrupted and absorbed into the system after the initial wave of enthusiasm. It is clear that there has to be a party or parties of the working class in order to ensure that theory, the educational work consequent on the theory and the necessary organisation are present.

However, socialist ideas cannot simply emerge from an elite group of people. The fundamental ideas must already be the property of ordinary people before they can be theorised, turned into a strategy, and widely disseminated in all their complexity. This implies a process of mounting struggles from which people can learn as well as the development of a broad layer of intellectuals who are able to genuinely refute the propaganda of the established order and expand the knowledge and theory necessary for the working class to take power. Only in this way, with the dialectical interaction of theory with struggle, can the population as a whole make socialist ideas their own.

This is all the more necessary given the way objective and subjective conditions for the formation of the class are merging into one another.