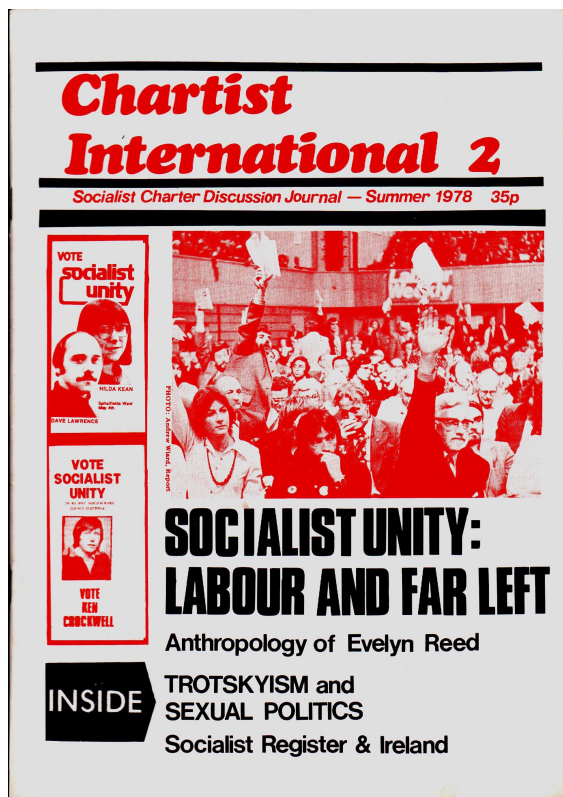


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Summer 1978

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Editorial Comment: The stagnation of Marxist theory

In the editorial in the last issue of *Chartist International* we referred to a problem which is at the heart of all debate and discussion on the far left today: the failure of Marxist theory to keep pace with the real developments taking place in the world in the period since the Second World War. In that issue we commented, “the after effects of the longest boom in the history of capitalism, the countervailing and contradictory tendencies at work as the system moves into crisis and the effects of these developments on the maturing class consciousness, all these imperatively demand of Marxists not satisfied with the stale remains of 40 years of stagnation in the Marxist movement, an answer to the question, ‘Through what stage are we passing?’”.

No group on the revolutionary left today can maintain the view that there have not been substantially new developments in the world balance of forces and within bourgeois society itself which have placed demands on our movement for a thorough-going reappraisal of the conditions that prevail today. Whether it is judged that these new developments have taken place in the realm of the economy, in the superstructure of the state and civil society, or in the psychological character of individual human beings as a consequence of the authoritarian conditioning of capitalist society, the tasks of this reappraisal have been taken on by some sections of the left.

In Britain alone a whole range of non-sectarian journals and magazines have been produced which have been probing and analysing areas of social, economic and personal relations which have not been approached by orthodox Marxists for decades. Particularly important in this respect are journals such as *Capital & Class* (journal of the Conference of Socialist Economists), *Critique, Ideology & Consciousness*, *Race & Class, m/f* (journal of socialist feminism) and the now well-established *New Left Review*.

However, the organised left, (that is, those organised into parties, leagues, groups etc.) have, in many cases, responded to these new developments in a typically ungracious way. The attempt to provide a class perspective for understanding the emergence in the post-war period of such things as a greatly expanded state sector of the western economies, the victory of anti-capitalist revolutions led by non-orthodox Leninist parties in China, Cuba, and Indo-China, the emergence of an international mass radical feminist movement, the growing consciousness amongst sections of society to sexual oppression, have all led to the epithets ‘revisionism’, ‘capitulation to bourgeois pressures’ etc., being flung about. These orthodox Leninists have a profound belief that the only political statements worth making are those which can be verified by the authority of a good number of quotes from Marx, Engels and Co. The bull-headedness of sections of the left on this score has succeeded in creating a new tyranny which has an inhibiting effect on achieving a proper dialogue and debate between people on the left. It is a tyranny which teaches the adherents of its own faith to actively distrust, and even espouse hatred for anything which seems like a new idea, particularly if it seems likely to cause us to challenge a few of the old ones.

Eurocommunism

Typical of this sort of response has been the reaction of the orthodox left to the emergence of Eurocommunism in the western Communist Parties. The standard description of this development is that it marks a retreat into reformism. According to this view, the desire to avoid the use of terms like

Leninism or dictatorship of the proletariat on the part of these CPs marks an unqualified step back into social democracy. The conclusion drawn from all this is that nothing particularly new is happening: there is still social democratic reformism just as there always has been, only now augmented by the erstwhile CPs, and there is still the revolutionary left, battling for its principles and the integrity of the workers' movement.

In reality, life is not so simple. There still remains a great difference between social democrats like Callaghan and Schmidt and even the most rightward-leaning euro communists like Carrillo or Berlinguer. These clear differences lie in the following areas. Social democracy (of the modern-day Socialist International variety) is, above all else, a pragmatic response on the part of sections of the working class and allied intellectuals to the day-to-day problems of living in a capitalist society. Its response to these problems is partial and one-sided, reflecting an overwhelming preoccupation with economist and welfare-ist concerns. It scarcely ever rises to the level of a coherently and consistently worked-out view of the world. If social democracy generates anything near worthy of the name philosophy, it is of a deeply utilitarian and empiricist variety.

Eurocommunism on the other hand, while at the level of *tactics*, places emphasis on non-revolutionary, reformist arenas such as parliament, participation in 'responsible' pro-capitalist governments, support for austerity programmes and even strong-state law and order, approaches these tactical questions from the initial standpoint of the overall problems of achieving the transition (or the transition to the transition) between capitalism and socialism. Now all this is undoubtedly very convoluted and Machiavellian, but it does *not* represent the adoption of a pure and simple reformist standpoint *nor* does it represent a continuation of the old Stalinist project of holding back the working class from revolution (as the traditional Trotskyist characterisation has it). On the contrary, the manoeuvres and stratagems of the CPs of Italy, Spain and France represent an attempt on the part of mass workers' parties to come to terms with a new world balance of power and a new configuration of social forces within the advanced labour movements of western Europe.

A key element in the development of the Eurocommunist current has been its strong advocacy of democracy (at least outside of the ranks of the Eurocommunist CPs!) and its distance from the regimes of eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. While this has clearly meant an adaption to the traditions of liberal bourgeois democracy it has also meant that the debate about the nature of a socialist society, previously completely dominated by the existence of the east European states, has now been thrown wide open in the European workers' movement.

For many west European communists the turning point came with the water-shed year of 1968. In a period of general radicalisation where new forms of struggle were being explored the CPs of France and Italy had to both appear as radical opponents of contemporary society, as potential parties of government and, above all, as opponents of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. This last point had a traumatic impact on the western CPs. There was no way that the pretence could be maintained that there was a 'fascist rising' threatening to overthrow the social conquests of the Czech people as had been the official line on the Hungarian revolution of 1956. It was brought forcibly home to the French and Italian CPs that their acceptability as parties of government *and* their appeal to radical workers and youth would depend increasingly on the distance they took from the policies of the Kremlin. In thus striking out on their own the western CPs were confronted with all the unresolved problems of socialist strategy in the advanced capitalist countries. Eurocommunism was, and is, an attempt *to* tackle these problems, in the debased and inflated currency of a Stalinised 'Marxism' — but, nevertheless, a genuine enough attempt.

Left's response

It is not the purpose of this Editorial Comment to make out the case for or against Eurocommunism. This will need to be done elsewhere and at greater length. The point we wish to make is that to date, the

orthodox revolutionary left has failed to produce an adequate account of Eurocommunism which can explain it in the context of a response on the part of mass working class organisations to the complex changes which have taken place in social relations at a whole number of levels and which have had the most profound effect on the labour movement of western Europe since the war. The only explanations we have been offered to date are that either the CPs have become standard reformist parties and hence we respond to them in the standardly prescribed way, or, that the whole thing is just a new deceit cooked up by the Stalinist bureaucrats in Moscow etc.

The consequences of these errors of gross over-simplification are very grave for the revolutionary left. For those groups who believe that Eurocommunism equals social democracy it has meant identifying opposition to the Eurocommunist currents as being relatively healthy radical-proletarian gut-reactions against a revisionist betrayal of Leninism. Hence the most reactionary, 1930-type ‘Moscow right or wrong’ thinking has been defended on the grounds that it appears to have a bit of working class ‘beef’ about it. The other side of this is that each and every comment of the Eurocommunist leaders is systematically dissected, analysed and revealed as further evidence of liberal social democratic infection. In this way, such groups as the extremely orthodox *Revolutionary Communist Group* can make such comments as ‘a corollary of this theory of a multi-party socialist state [expounded by the eurocommunists] is the abandonment of the concept of the communist part as a vanguard party of the working class.’ (*Revolutionary Communist* 6, April 1977) When revolutionary communists undertake to defend ‘one party states’ against the revisionism of the ‘democratic’ aims of the Eurocommunists one can only acknowledge the pitiful state of the revolutionary movement and ask just who are the ‘Stalinists’.

Such attempts to ‘analyse’ Eurocommunism fail altogether to explain anything to the working class. What is studiously avoided is the fact that the development of Marxist conceptual tools of analysis have failed to keep pace with the concrete developments in post-war social life. For all its failings, eurocommunism represents an attempt to come to terms with this new reality. If we face up to this fact properly then we can see that a Marxist critique of Eurocommunism consists not in finding a place for it in convenient ‘reformist’ or ‘Stalinist’ pigeon-holes, but the extent to which it is a *success* or *failure* in achieving its own stated objectives — that is, to provide an updated perspective on contemporary western society which would provide communist workers with a basis on which they can operate in day-to-day struggles, with the ultimate objective of attaining the transition to socialism in mind. Orthodox Leninism has failed to provide a basis of this nature to the workers’ movement for the last thirty years. For the revolutionary left to offer this sort of perspective to the working class movement it will firstly have to effect a revolution in its own thinking. A major aspect of this revolution would revolve around the understanding that a definitive line of action is decided on through the process of a concrete analysis of the forces and social relations which exist *at this present time*. We should call for a complete end to the sort of ‘theoretical’ investigation which aims to prove that such and such a tactic/ programme/ speech was wholly, partially or otherwise in accordance with the thought of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.

In the preceding Editorial Comment we have chosen Euro-communism to illustrate the half-hearted way in which the revolutionary left has attempted to analyse the situation today. We could have equally chosen the question of the emergence of a mass, international feminist current in the last two decades. Two articles in this issue of *Chartist International* attempt to deal in some detail with the way in which the revolutionary left has failed to develop its ideas on the issue of the sexual oppression of women in step with the world outside. Martin Cook, in his article *Trotskyism and Sexual Politics*, reveals something of the way in which the revolutionary communist movement, the Lenin-Trotsky tradition, has failed to play a role of any significance in developing a framework for understanding the place of sexual oppression in capitalist class society. This was not simply because the issue was not around in their own lifetimes: a generation before the birth of Bolshevism and the Third International, Marx,

and particularly Engels in his work *'Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State'* had given some indication of the importance which they attached to the problem of women as the 'defeated sex' throughout the history of all class societies. In the Bolshevik party itself Alexandra Kollontai spoke out as a clear advocate of feminist concerns in the Russian revolutionary movement. At a slightly later date, the German psycho-analyst Wilhelm Reich established the pioneering 'sex-pol' clinics in the periphery of the communist movement and produced a series of brilliantly clear statements which sketched out the reasons why the sexual health of individuals in the workers' movement was of vital concern to those struggling for socialism. Irrespective of the early promise of the Marxist movement pioneering the way towards a clear scientific understanding of the nature and the consequences of sexual oppression, it has latterly actually lagged far behind and has even played a conservative role in many respects in this field. The detailed, radical critique of sexual oppression and sexual life in class society which has been attained today comes almost exclusively from a feminist tradition. Revolutionary socialists today have to learn to regard the achievements of feminism as something which, in most ways, they have to learn from, rather than to merely dissect it to reveal its 'petty bourgeois' character. Comrade Cook's article goes a long way to providing a more sober assessment of the revolutionary left's historical contribution to the struggle against sexual oppression than the exaggerated claims which are normally made for the communist movement.

On a related theme, C.D.Knight's article *The Anthropology of Evelyn Reed* attempts to deal with the claims of this veteran of the American socialist movement to have solved the riddle of the evolution of the human species and at the same time to have restored the female sex to its rightful place of honour in this process. Comrade Knight, in a strongly polemical style, draws attention to the inadequacies of Reed's method in this respect, which he sees as having more in common with nineteenth and early twentieth century methods of anthropological discourse of which James G. Frazer and Robert Briffault are perhaps the prime examples. This style of anthropology is very deeply rooted in an extremely selective use of available evidence and a marked tendency to indulge in the grossest speculations. It has the dangerous attraction that, at an extremely superficial level, it provides some evidence for the existence of a matriarchal epoch in the course of human evolution.

The problem with Frazer and Briffault, on whom Reed leans for the bulk of the evidence for her theories (and even to a very large extent the more eminent figures of Lewis Henry Morgan and Edward Burnett Tylor, the acknowledged 'fathers' of anthropological science) is that the bulk of the empirical evidence on which they deduced their highly speculative theories has been proven by a later generation of researchers to be irrefutably *false*, beyond any reasonable doubt. Thus Reed's extremely elaborate account of the early matriarchal society, which seems to be so clearly logical and appealingly simple, is actually based on the flimsiest foundation. The thrust of Knight's position is that an argument which seeks to establish the existence of a matriarchal society which is based on such demonstrably incorrect evidence is not a service to feminism or socialism at all, it is a service to the enemies of these movements.

Knight does not abandon the idea of a matriarchal epoch, on the contrary, a thorough analysis of the problem based on the evidence of more contemporary, and more rigorously scientific anthropological theorists, such as Lévi-Strauss, despite the beliefs of these scientists themselves, points more clearly than ever in the direction of an epoch of primitive, communistic, matriarchal, societies. Following through this position it will be seen that the struggle to establish this revolutionary view of human society and human nature in its proper place, will be more centrally concerned with the ideological confrontation with the best and most scientific of bourgeois anthropologists who presently reject the view that matriarchal society ever existed, than in attempting to bolster the position of those few equally bourgeois anthropologists, who, on now totally outdated evidence, over sixty years ago happen to arrive at the notion that it might well have existed.

The brevity imposed on comrade Knight, by virtue of the fact that the article was intended for this brief journal, has possibly meant that the alternate argument in favour of the existence of matriarchy is not developed to the highest degree of satisfaction. To those of our readers who feel that more concrete evidence should be brought forward to back up this alternate view we can promise that we will be

returning to this question in future issues of *Chartist International*. Also, comrade Knight is presently completing a full-length book which seeks to outline the major elements of a Marxist theory of the evolution of the human species which is expected to be ready for publication in the near future.

Also contained in this issue is a review of the *Socialist Unity* project which has been instigated by a number of groups on the British left in an attempt to provide an electoral alternative to the Labour Party. Mike Davis's article speaks for itself in providing a clear critique of the *SU* project in terms of the inadequacy of its programme, and the dangerous, damaging inconsistency of the main protagonists of *SU*, the *Internationalist Marxist Group*. In the course of a single year the IMG has switched its position from attempting to encourage and strengthen the work done by the socialist currents *inside* the Labour Party, to an attempt to present their own organisation with its allies in *SU*, as the *alternative* to those comrades they were previously attempting to assist in their struggles.

Another feature of this article is the statement of the *Socialist Charter's* own perspective for building a revolutionary socialist tendency tendency inside the British labour movement. For our tendency, the struggle for socialism brings militants at every stage into conflict with reformism inside the working class, both as an ideology, as an organisation, in the form of the Labour Party and the trade unions. The absolutely hegemonic position which reformism occupies in all aspects of working class life makes the project of building a separate, independent revolutionary socialist organisation, outside of the day-to-day contact with the political battles inside the Party and the unions, utterly utopian. The standpoint of the *Socialist Charter* is that the far left should be struggling for their ideas inside the Labour Party, and that in undertaking this fight, we have to take part in the day to day battles of the working class. In the coming weeks and months advanced sections of the workers' movement are going to be involved in the struggle to win votes for the Party to ensure that Labour is returned to office in the forthcoming general election. In refusing to stand in solidarity with these workers it must be said that the *SU* project appears as a gigantic diversion which cuts across real interests of the labour movement which are to maintain their present unity and to fight to strengthen the socialist currents inside the Party and the unions.

The final article in this issue of *Chartist International* is a review of the discussion on the struggle in Ireland contained in three articles in *the Socialist Register 1977*. Peter Chalk explains why the ten year long most recent episode of the ever-recurrent Irish Troubles can only be understood in the context of the struggle to unite the Irish nation. It is only in the context of a united Ireland that the Irish people can exercise a genuine right of self-determination in opposition to the forces of world imperialism. Readers who find this viewpoint of particular interest might like to refer to the journal *Ireland Socialist Review*, which is advertised elsewhere in this journal, which contains other articles written by members of the *Socialist Charter*.

Don Flynn
28.5.78

Socialist Unity: Labour and the Far Left

By Mike Davis

“The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement.”

Marx and Engels: *The Communist Manifesto*

The ‘success’ of the Labour Government in carrying out many of the anti-working class policies the Heath government had been unable to implement has produced a contradictory movement amongst socialists and working class people. From the millions of Labour supporters who voted for Labour in 1974 has come a response initially of enthusiasm, then confusion and bitterness as many of the goods promised failed to materialise, and most recently a new surge of loyalty and support blended with an aroused anti-Tory, anti-fascist sentiment. From more class conscious workers and militant socialists, especially those on the revolutionary left, the inability to challenge successfully the right-wing, pro-capitalist policies of the Labour and trade union leaders reflected in the non-appearance of ‘mass action’, has come a mood which is searching for ‘unity’ and regroupment of revolutionary groups and individuals.

Many socialists not aligned to any particular revolutionary organisation, and indeed many who are members of working class political organisations, often comment on the splintered, fragmented and apparently sectarian character of the revolutionary groups (more than twenty groups today claim a heritage from Trotskyism in Britain). It is a confusing and off-putting picture for many. Yet, socialist or workers’ unity is a notion which few but the most inveterate bullheaded sectarians would dissent from. Unity unfortunately is both a much misunderstood and much abused concept on the left in Britain. It is not simply sufficient to declare oneself for unity but to know exactly what measure of unity already exists, how further unity can be built and what is the nature of the political divisions which separate the movement for socialism organisationally.

Conceptions of Unity

This article will attempt to critically examine a particular approach to the problem of unity. Namely the project of Socialist Unity (SU) which seeks both to unify socialist groups and militants *and* unify an opposition to the Labour Government. We will look more closely at what exactly is meant by working class unity and revolutionary regroupment, and the efficacy and correctness for revolutionary socialists to stand candidates against the Labour Party.

Socialist Unity represents a very different conception of unity and one which we will argue stands in counter position to the already existing workers unity, which despite its social democratic political character, should not be underestimated. It has been argued that “Socialist Unity corresponds to the needs of the class struggle at the present time for unity.” We would argue that on the contrary SU flies in the face of these felt needs on the part of millions of working class people for unity in their ranks, by denying in practice the importance of the Labour Party and the almost instinctive drive to maintain that unity embodied in the Labour Party and its relation to the trade unions (a sentiment so ably exploited by the “social contractors”).

An historical approach is missing from SU’s conception of the problems of unity. Although the Labour Party has a pro-capitalist leadership, it nonetheless represents an immense historical gain for

the British working class and a conquest from which nothing should blind us. Workers in the United States of America, for example, have never been able to create a Labour Party of their own, and are forced to choose between two openly bourgeois parties: that is, between the devil of the Democrats and the Republican deep blue sea.

With the creation of the trade unions and then the Labour Party, the British working class achieved a very real historical conquest. Within these organisations are concentrated the broadest range of opinions, ideas and perspectives for socialism. Notwithstanding the marginal decline in membership of the Labour Party, in 1974 more than eleven million working people turned out to vote Labour. Seven million trade unionists are affiliated to the Labour Party and their union dues are the financial backbone of the Party. Despite the record of the present Labour Government, we have recently witnessed renewed support and electoral success for the Labour Party in Scotland and the North which has confounded the pundits and their swingometers. Traditions and common ideological world views are too easily overlooked by the shallow observer who sees a “void” or a “vacuum on the left” where historical movement allows for no such theoretical niceties.

Thus it is the unity established in the Labour Party and trade unions, a form of workers’ unity, that a revolutionary tendency needs to build on, explaining in words and deeds their Marxist policies in a living relationship with the very organisations in which and through which the workers perceive their own problems. The conflict of ideas in the Labour Party, the struggle between left and right, the fight for democracy in the movement are fundamentally the struggles within the working class itself for a way out of the crisis.

We will examine other aspects of this, the fundamental problem of workers unity, during the course of this article. But Socialist Unity claims not only to stand for workers unity but also for unity of the revolutionary left regrouped in one unified revolutionary organisation under the umbrella of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. And it is in this light, as we have indicated, that Socialist Unity (SU) has attracted the greatest amount of publicity and paper support as a “unity project”. The organisation which has been most conspicuous in advocating the need for a “unified revolutionary organisation” (not of course the only one) has been the International Marxist Group (IMG). Unfortunately, over the last eighteen months, the IMG’s whole perspective of revolutionary unity seems to have been narrowed continuously down to the point where Socialist Unity as an electoral organisation/grouping has become visibly the only focus in and around which revolutionary regroupment can take place — aside from selective discussions in the paper *Socialist Challenge*.

General Condition of Class Struggle

Most active socialists now recognise that since 1975 and the emergence of the social contract a significant downturn has occurred in the tempo, militancy and unity of working class struggle. The Labour Government, elected in the midst of the deepest capitalist crisis since the second world war, has imposed defeat after defeat on the working class. Three years of wage restraining incomes policy. Three years of public expenditure cuts. Almost three years of unemployment of over 1 million (unofficially up to 2 million). Sacrifice and ‘national interest’ under the banner of the social contract and the great crusade against inflation have been the catch- phrases for inflicting cuts of over 20 per cent in the living standards of working class people.

In circumstances of defeat and impoverishment, little wonder that the poison of racialism and sexist prejudice floats to the surface and is fully exploited by the capitalist media, the ruling class and its political representatives. Fascism, in the shape of the National Front, also rears its ugly head from the sewers, striving to deepen the division amongst the working class and oppressed and incite white against black, non-communist against communist.

Of course workers have attempted to resist the policies of the Labour Government and TUC cohorts. But the resistance has been sporadic, fragmented and localised. The Grunwick struggle, the opposition

to the closure of the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson women's hospital have stood out like towering rocks in this ebb tide. Where the trade union movement has been able to break out of localised struggle, such as in the firefighters strike against Phase Three, the trade union and Labour leaders coupled with the weakness of the ideological alternatives to wage restraint have combined to isolate and defeat the workers.

Light in the tunnel is clearly now showing in the anti-racist and anti-fascist struggle, which has recently reached a new peak in the magnificent 80,000 strong demonstration and Carnival against the Nazi NF and racialism. Possibly the beginnings of a firm united front against fascism?

But here is not the place for detailed analysis of these movements or the character of the downturn in class struggle (see *Chartist International* No. 1 'Political Perspectives' for fuller treatment of this). We wish merely to address readers to the general state of class struggle in order to show that the problem of revolutionary regroupment and workers unity cannot be divorced from the general fight for a workers united front against capitalism.

Background to Socialist Unity

When *Socialist Challenge* itself was launched, an editorial in its forerunner *Red Weekly* on May 19th declared:

“Socialist Challenge will make its central goal the fight for an organised socialist opposition to fight the effects of the capitalist crisis. And it will be in the forefront of the campaign for a principled regroupment of the revolutionary left.”

Put in these terms, such an aim is one with which most serious revolutionary tendencies would be hard put to disagree. But the problem only begins here. As we have argued in other publications on the Trotskyist movement, the main problem for 'Trotskyist' organisations has been their isolation and fragmentation, virtually from the inception of 'Trotskyism' as a faction within the Third International. This was in part due to adverse politico-social conditions (defeats of the 1930s, destruction of cadres in Second World War, the postwar boom etc) and equally the theoretical and ideological confusion of Trotsky's epigones and the limitations of Third International Marxism when applied to a complex, bourgeois-democratic, expanding post-war capitalist west.

The late sixties/early seventies upsurge in class struggle in the western capitalist heartlands produced a mushrooming of many new tendencies to the left and not so left of the Communist Parties. It was in this context that the question of "unity" was again sharply posed in the post war period.

The International Socialists (SWP) led the first "unity call" in 1968 as an immediate option to fill "the vacuum on the left" following Harold Wilson's betrayals. Only Workers Fight responded to the call, The attempt was ended unceremoniously in 1972/3 with the successive expulsions of the Trotskyist Tendency (Workers Fight, now the International Communist League), and the Revolutionary Opposition a year later. No attempt was made to clarify political differences and perspectives which had produced the fragmentation in the first place.

Today the IMG proclaims itself as the champion of regroupment and "left unity". As always, the problem is however, how is this unity to be achieved? We have always tried to stress in our own documents (maybe not always very well), that in such a period of fragmentation and crisis for Marxism only strict political and ideological demarcation, a willingness to admit mistakes, to admit none of us have a monopoly of wisdom or all the answers, a fraternal discussion of differences on analysis and method, concepts, perspectives and programme could provide a sufficient basis for enduring unity. Though this must always be combined with a preparedness to engage in joint activity. As we said in a balance sheet of discussions with the IMG in 1976:

“Unity on an unclear, un-Marxist basis was building on quick-sand. Any \such 'unity' would spring apart like a broken watch at the first real test of great events.”

Whilst it is true that sectarianism, expulsions and unfounded splits have added to the general fragmentation of the British left, the fundamental reasons for the divisions of the Trotskyist movement lie more in the conditions of the post-war period and the failure of the early formations to satisfactorily *develop Marxist analysis* of social and economic conditions and *maintain a correct relationship to the working class and its organisations*. Parallels do exist today between our struggle for unity and those of Trotsky and the Left Opposition in the early 1930s, when the Marxist movement was suffering a similar process of fragmentation. Quotations are never a very accurate way of presenting ideas because they are always dated by historical circumstances and specific conditions, but this quote from Trotsky seems apposite to the current problem of recoupment:

‘The Opposition (Left Opposition) is now taking shape on the basis of principled ideological demarcation, and not on the basis of mass actions. Mass actions tend as a rule to wash away secondary and episodic difference and to aid the fusion of friendly and close tendencies. Conversely, ideological groupings in a period of stagnation or ebb-tide disclose a great tendency towards differentiation, splits and internal struggles.

We cannot leap out of the period in which we live. We must pass through it. A *clear, precise ideological differentiation* is unconditionally necessary. It prepares future successes.” (Trotsky: *Groupings in the Communist Opposition*, 1929)

Is Socialist Unity the Road to Revolutionary Unity?

On the surface, the initial aim of Socialist Unity appeared to be to provide a forum for grouping together various revolutionary socialist groups and individuals to discuss unity in the context of specific actions against the attacks of the ruling class and its Labour allies. But increasingly it became clear that Socialist Unity was not merely the main focus for revolutionary regroupment but that it would operate almost solely around the question of standing candidates against Labour in elections. In other words, Socialist Unity puts the cart before the horse. In the fashion of classic opportunism, all the issues that divide the Trotskyist movement are swept aside or reduced to trivia and replaced by an activity-orientated grouping for electoral unity. Essentially, the IMG has *drawn a line* on the issue of a *tactic of intervention* — the vague concept of “class struggle candidates against the Labour Party”; those on one side agreeing with this shallow and vague concept and the rest of the left on the other.

The divisions of Trotskyists and other revolutionary socialists are reduced to one question: “standing candidates against the Labour Party”. How any kind of clarity, firm foundations for unity and serious discussion can occur on this basis defies the imagination.

That Socialist Unity has become the primary and apparently only focus for revolutionary regroupment has become clear over the last few months, both in the columns of *Socialist Challenge*, in the actual emphasis on electoral interventions and search for common candidates with the Socialist Workers Party, and from the first and to date, only conference of Socialist Unity on November 19th 1977.

The Socialist Unity Conference

This Conference, attended by approximately 200 people, highlighted most of the dilemmas confronting an approach to socialist unity — small ‘s’ and small V — which is both sectarian and opportunist. Socialist Unity has the support of the IMG, the Big Flame group, Martin Shaw (an ex-International Socialist [SWP] ex-student leader) and other members of the Hull Socialist Alliance (an amalgam of aligned and non-aligned socialists), some socialist feminist groups, some organised Asian socialists and libertarian Anarchist groups. At the conference itself the Workers League were present in a supporting capacity as were some Maoists from the obscure Communist Formation.

In the Bulletin for the Socialist Unity conference we were informed that,

“The Conference is open to all organisations and individuals who support the concept of standing class struggle candidates, standing on an alternative socialist programme in selected constituencies and wards in elections, parliamentary and local.”

Immediately after this statement we were told,

“All people attending the Conference and accepting the above premise will be allowed to speak and vote.”

And herein lay the proverbial rub. At no time has there ever been a conference or open meeting of SU to discuss the meaning of “class struggle candidates”, and least of all the programme on which such candidates would stand. And yet from the outset, members of the International Communist League, Socialist Charter and International Spartacists were prevented from speaking at the conference (so too we believe were Workers Power) on the grounds that these tendencies disagreed with a concept and a programme that had never been discussed outside the confines of internal IMG or Big Flame meetings.

Without labouring further the point that Socialist Unity represents the narrowing-down of the basis for revolutionary regroupment to an *electoral tactic*, let us examine SU on its own terms.

Socialist Unity — On Its Own Terms

Prior to the November 19th Socialist Unity Conference, a *Socialist Challenge* article had reported in rather grandiose terms that “Last week’s Labour Party conference ended on a note of tranquillity... the Socialist Unity conference being held in London on 19th November now becomes even more important as a focus for organising a fight-back against the attacks of the ruling class and their Labour allies.”

At the SU conference itself Bob Pennington (IMG, now SU organiser) summarised the position of the IMG leadership on the future of SU:

“How does SU serve and fit into the interests of the working class at present? Capitulation characterises the existing leadership. Lefts don’t mobilise support for their policies.

The CPGB is the same because the main strategy is an alliance of the lefts... therefore there is no struggle. This has left a void, a gap. How does the working class and its allies start a fightback? Those who want to fight can be given an alternative programme and organisation. Not party building but (1) SU corresponds to the needs of the class struggle at the present time for unity and, (2) SU has a preparedness for open dialogue and debate.”

Pennington went on to stress the dangers of “overstructuring” SU and located SU firmly in the context of the “class struggle left-wing project”. “I’m in favour not only of class struggle candidates”, he emphasised, “but also support for those who don’t stand on a SU platform. For example, if a woman stood on a NAC platform I’d be in favour of that, or an anti-racist.” “The key”, for Pennington, “was SU campaigning for unity and a break with left-sectarianism”. The hopeless shallowness of these words we will show shortly.

More recently, on the eve of the Lambeth Central by-election in South London (in which the SU candidate received 287 votes to Labour’s 10,311), the editorial in *Socialist Challenge* (20.4.78) carried the headline “Labour and Socialist Unity”. The editorial posed the following questions in an honest mood of self-examination.

“Why do we stand candidates against Labour? Are we an alternative? What is our central slogan for the General Election?”

The editorial managed only to attempt answers to the first two questions, contenting itself with a reply to unmentioned abstentionists by reiterating its call for a Labour vote in the remainder of the editorial.

What reasons does *Socialist Challenge* give for standing Socialist Unity candidates?

“We stand candidates against Labour because we believe that it is essential to project a socialist alternative in local and national elections; to try to catalyse a current which is sympathetic to socialist politics. More than that they offer militants who are fighting for class struggle politics an opportunity to show through their campaigns and struggles how their policies are the ones which take the fightback forward ”

As an afterthought we are also told that “elections also help us to have a dialogue with the masses — a beneficial experience.” In an article on *Socialist Challenge* on 9.2.78, announcing Socialist Unity’s intention to stand 60 to 80 candidates in the May municipal elections, we were told SU also “insists there is a need to fight back now” against Callaghan’s Government.



An IMG election meeting in Stechfont in spring 1977

Socialist Unity and the USEC Theses on Britain

In the midst of the euphoria arising from the Socialist Unity ‘project’, the votes cast, the selecting of candidates, the campaigning, it is worthwhile to look back, first of all, to the last published United

Secretariat of the Fourth International Theses on Britain, which appeared in the IMG's theoretical journal *International*, (Vol 3, no. 1). Here we find a much more sobering comment on the British class struggle and the lack of any mass struggle against the then Wilson-led Labour Government (a situation which we might add, has continued and looks set to endure for the duration of this Labour Government).

“While a challenge to the Labour Party at all levels, including electorally, will be necessary for the final historic defeat of social democracy, the break of the British working class with social democracy is very unlikely to take the form, in the near future, of the setting up of a rival mass party or of a *significant challenge to the Labour Party by the revolutionary left on the electoral field*. This break will much more likely take the triple form of a turn away from parliamentary and electoral politics without an organisational break with the Labour Party as such of united actions of a broader and broader vanguard, both within and outside the Labour Party; and of a deeper and deeper penetration of revolutionary socialist and communist ideology among the rank and file trade unionists and Labour Party members.” (our emphasis p.16).

The theses then went on to outline a very different kind of perspective for a united and non-“left-sectarian” fightback against the Labour Government, than that advocated and embodied in the whole Socialist Unity project.

“Under these circumstances, [of an incipient but still small-scale conflict of militants with the Labour Government] where every objective development creates the need for a generalised political response and leadership of the working class, but at the same time the overwhelming majority of even the most militant workers still give their political allegiance to the Labour Party, such a leadership and political perspective *cannot be created in the immediate future* — the coming 12–18 months which is the time period posed — *outside the Labour Party*, if it is to be credible and acceptable to larger sections of the working class. The whole pressure of the situation is thus to the creation of a challenge to the leadership of Wilson-Murray-Jones *inside the Labour Party* and the labour movement... The task of revolutionary marxists in Britain is not mechanically to counterpose themselves to this process, which in any case they are powerless to alter but to ensure both that even those workers who do not yet break with their illusions in the Labour Party adopt the most advanced demands and methods of struggle possible” (our emphasis, p.14)

This extract displays two major weaknesses. On the one hand a crude objectivism based on a methodologically wrong conception of the inexorable ‘objective’ movement of the working class towards an explosion — which of course has not occurred and is most unlikely to occur under this Labour Government. On the other hand, what this metaphysical “pressure” and “objective development” ignores and denies is the level of consciousness and activity of the working class itself which was and is a far throw from the generalised challenge to the existing leadership of the labour movement mechanically prescribed by the USec Theses. Nonetheless, despite the hugely over-optimistic time scale and one-sided catastrophic perspective for the development of mass opposition to the Labour Government and the premise for revolutionaries being in the Labour Party (a growing left- wing) which we reject, the Theses at least tried to grapple with the reality of the Labour Party for millions of workers, and outline, however inadequately, a perspective for united front work with Labour Party members. This approach to unity is indeed far remote from the electoralism of Socialist Unity.

It was a perspective which many IMG members and supporters attempted to implement, by re-starting some patient political work in the rank and file of the Labour Party. Work that the IMG had abandoned in the late 1960s following the growth of mystical “new mass vanguards”.

The tactic of standing candidates in elections against the Labour Party was given no emphasis or airing in the 1976 Theses — which are presumably the guiding lights for the IMG's work in Britain. This leads us into the real problems with Socialist Unity *on its own terms*.

The Problems With Socialist Unity

The United Secretariat Theses presented a perspective of struggle against the Labour Government from within the Labour Party. It is a perspective that has significant bearing on reality. Namely, that despite its right-wing, class collaborationist policies, the Labour leadership is based on a Labour Party which is the only mass political organisation of the British working class. Whether that Labour Party is awash with millions of active members or not is really the wrong question. The fact is, it is the party to which millions of working class people and trade unionists traditionally turn as an alternative to the Tories. More than that, the illusions which are the bedrock of social democratic policies are shared by millions of these same working class people, who have by and large been prepared over the last few years to go along with the social contract and the parliamentary road to change.

The USec Theses, at least in part, gives cognisance to this situation. Unfortunately, Socialist Unity operates on a different perspective, presenting a different picture of the situation. This is the first question which the IMG should at least attempt to answer.

We disagree with the USec Theses that work in the Labour Party is an episodic tactic, but it is an improvement on the Socialist Unity position, which whether it has the support of individual Labour Party members or not, can only appear as a sectarian grouping to the vast majority of Labour members and supporters. More importantly, it is a *diversion* from the main struggle in the Labour Party against the dominant policies and leadership (a la the USec Theses) and an *obstacle* to those *Socialist Challenge* supporters who are trying to do some serious work in the Labour Party.

We would now like to pose a series of questions to SU supporters:

1. What prevents you putting your politics forwards in the rank and file Constituency Labour Parties? In Lambeth Central over 100 people came along to a Socialist Unity meeting. Such numbers would significantly alter the balance of power in the Lambeth Central CLP, if not become a dominant force when coupled with the existing socialists in that CLP. You would appear to be standing for the unity of the local labour movement, actually strengthen that unity in practice and be listened to by a much larger range of Labour supporters than would probably listen to Socialist Unity. The experience of struggle against the existing right-wing supporters of the Labour Government's policies in that area would certainly take the "fight-back forward" a hundred times more than the 287 votes cast for the SU candidate, and would be educating those involved in the struggle against social democratic policies.
2. What about IMG/*Socialist Challenge* supporters in the Labour Party trying to do serious united front work with other LP militants? What possible help can SU be to these militants? It can only unnecessarily impede their activity by them being identified with a sectarian grouping with little or no base in most areas. Has there ever been any open discussion in SU about the problems standing candidates against the Labour Party poses for those *Socialist Challenge* supporters actually working in the LP? it would appear they are just to muddle through, denying their political affiliations, muttering favourable words or staying silent about SU, and downplaying the importance of consistent work in the Labour Party.
3. How is SU to show militants "how their [Socialist Unity] politics are the ones which can take the fightback forward? If it is by issuing independent propaganda then that can be done through the Labour Party. In many constituencies during the recent council elections, thousands of LP Young Socialists' leaflets opposing racism and immigration laws, cuts, unemployment etc. etc. were distributed. Anti-Nazi League literature was distributed. Many other kinds of campaign literature was also distributed on various issues, like abortion rights and nursery facilities. In many cases, it was as a consequence of patient work through local CLPs that actual election material itself contained many policies that revolutionary socialists would not disagree with.

If it is not by propaganda, then in what other way can the “fightback” be taken forward? Perhaps through the votes cast. But it has yet to be shown how a few hundred votes can take a struggle forward. In analysing voting returns it is very difficult to say just exactly what proportion of votes were protest votes, miscast votes and votes for a fight-back. That an inveterate sectarian organisation like the Workers Revolutionary Party could gain 271 votes in Lambeth Central says mountains about the importance of those votes. Gr that a pop singer like Jonathan King can poll over 2,000 votes in a by-election as a ‘Royalist’ candidate. There are great dangers in extrapolating from votes of a few hundred anything of great significance. But more importantly, votes should not be confused with a fight-back.

The only aspect on which a fight-back could be said to have been boosted is on the level of campaign organisations, which nine times out of ten already existed or could have been generated through working in the Labour Party. For example, anti-racist committees, abortion groups, nursery campaigns, anti-cuts campaigns etc. This leads on to a fourth and fifth problem which came up at the Socialist Unity Conference.

4. How can Socialist Unity avoid reproducing the practices of any bourgeois election campaign? Several speakers at the SU conference, including Raghieb Ahsan (who has four times stood as an independent socialist candidate in the Birmingham area, and most recently in the 1977 Ladywood claimed with great disappointment that SU parachuted in for a three-week blitz election campaign, primarily on a single issue i.e. anti-racialism, and then all-but disappeared. He said that no serious black work was being done in Birmingham (at the time of the conference, itself several months after the by-election) by SU or the IMG, no consolidation had been done, no political follow-up made. Ahsan put it down to lack of discussion and a deficiency in programme. But it is clearly much more than this. At root is the *weakness* and *small size* of revolutionary forces. The unpalatable fact of the matter is that revolutionaries have not yet done one 'nth of the serious political work in local areas to build up sufficient support in the mass organisations to even prove the case for standing against the Labour Party. Clearly, the base chosen in Ladywood was that of the immigrant community, whose political allegiances are not so defined as many white workers, and the vote gained did not represent any serious incursion into the white largely racist Labour vote.
5. The other horn of this dilemma was also pointed out at the SU Conference by Paul Thompson of Big Flame. Namely, the political content of consistent work, and the various constituent tendencies of SU going away after an election campaign and working for the politics, perspectives and analysis of their own organisation. On the one hand the Libertarian Communist Group selling their *Anarchist Worker*, Big Flame with *Big Flame*, IMG members with *Socialist Challenge*, having their own specific brands of politics. It may be that nothing fundamental divides these groups, but differences should at least have been debated openly and thoroughly in advance, before a “common programme” is put to workers and on the basis of which campaigns will supposedly be waged, and *action* taken. The SU voter who supports the SU programme expecting action or consistent work for its politics, will be unpleasantly surprised to find varying types of action being mounted on one hand and on the other, the SU does not even exist outside of simple electoral action. As an International Communist League leaflet put it: “SU’s programme may serve for election addresses, but it obviously doesn’t serve to map out precise guidelines for action in the class struggle.
6. Bob Pennington, SU organiser, says “Socialist Unity has a preparedness for open dialogue and debate” and a democratic selection procedure. But in many respects it fails even to meet the standards of the Labour Party at constituency party level. Take for example the Lambeth Central by-election. A few weeks before the election it was decided to stand a SU candidate. Yet the first position SU took was the ludicrous one of support for the West Indian Bloc (WIB) whose politics were as vague and unknown as the ubiquitous Bill Boakes. A week or so later the WIB split with

a large section declaring support for the Liberals as the only major party to condemn the Select Committee Race Relations Report and opposing the extremists of the left.

The selection of a SU candidate in Lambeth occurred in the space of about three weeks with two main meetings and overtures to the SWP. The process through which the Labour Party candidate, Tribune John Tilley, was chosen had occurred over a period of six months with ward/branch selection conferences throughout the constituency, shortlisting, interviewing and questioning and then the final selection of the candidate at a special delegate meeting of the General Management Committee.

The implication of Bob Pennington's comment is that the Labour Party is a reactionary mass. We have no wish to deny the non-democratic aspects of the Labour Party, but distortions for political expediency are totally misplaced. It will possibly be surprising for comrade Pennington that the dialogue and debate that is supposedly the private possession of SU has raged throughout the four Lambeth CLP's for several years now and resulted in the shift to the left in these CLPs. To the point moreover, where Lambeth council is now seen as a left-dominated council and its leader was seen by Thatcher, in a question in Parliament, as a Trotskyist infiltrator. But perhaps the debate and dialogue which characterised the Lambeth CLT is not the sort of exchange the SU organiser is seeking. Perhaps SU seeks to reach out to even broader untraversed stretches of the working class that the Labour Party cannot reach with its meagre resources and influence.

7. The *Socialist Challenge* editorial says that elections "help us to have a dialogue with the masses." Once again, all elections provide revolutionaries working in the Labour Party with an opportunity for mass canvassing, mass leafleting and a "dialogue with the masses". Indeed this sort of dialogue could have been conducted on a much bigger scale had not those revolutionary organisations who worked within the Labour Party in the 1950s and 1960s withdrawn from this arena of struggle, just at the time when the working class was beginning to flex its muscles and awaken from the quiescence of the post-war boom years.

When campaigning in elections, Socialist Charter members and *Chartist* supporters have argued for those Labour Party policies which would improve the conditions of the working class for example, the anti-racism policy passed at the 1976 conference, the pro-abortion on demand policy, the advocacy of full employment and expansion of public services contained in the 1974 Election Manifestos etc. Those policies which hold back, confuse, mislead or compromise the interests of working class internationalism we oppose and argue against, for example, on wage controls, Ireland etc. Despite the fact that the Labour Party might not correspond to a model of workers democracy in most constituencies members are not gagged when campaigning.

8. The *Socialist Challenge* editorial talks about "catalysing a current sympathetic to socialist politics". In the same issue a report of the progress of the Lambeth Central by-election campaign talked of SU's alternative policies helping "Labour Party members disgusted with the positions of their party leaders and candidate." The question that needs to be asked is: how does it help these members and how does it develop a "current sympathetic with socialist politics?" As we have already tried to show, the lack of a base in most areas prevents SU effectively following up any 'lightning' election work. But more important, the perspectives of SU fails to arm Labour Party militants with a political strategy which can assist them not merely in breaking themselves from reformist or left-reformist politics, but also winning others from them. Instead of leading to sharper ideological/political struggle within the Labour Party and other organisations, SU elevates itself as the alternative organisation through which these militants can fight the Labour leadership.

The problem is that most workers learn through their own experience. But that experience and learning how to fight reformist policies and leaders, and does not take place overnight, or even through an election campaign. It involves a lengthy period of propaganda and agitation on different

levels. When Lenin wrote *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* he pointed out that whilst disgust and outrage at the politics of the Labour leaders was an important component involved in the development of revolutionary Marxists consciousness, it needed to be trained in the forge of united struggle within the Labour Party itself. In other words, millions of workers look to the Labour Party for a lead. The job is to involve these workers in the struggle, in the Labour Party, unions etc, by patiently working alongside them, fighting for revolutionary politics whilst trying to build the unity of the workers organisations — most importantly, the trade unions and Labour Party.

9. There are no short-cuts in the fight against social democratic politics. Yet, no sooner do *Socialist Challenge* supporters commence what appears to be consistent work, trying to call the Labour leaders to account for their policies, than in many areas they abandon this work. This can be seen for example in Southall CLP. But come the Greater London Council election campaign, the promise of a few hundred votes from disaffected Asians for an independent candidate on anti-racist ticket was too much to resist. So the fruits of what work had been done were thrown to the four winds and *Socialist Challenge* supporters threw themselves into what was then the IMG candidates' campaign, abandoning the struggle in the Labour Party in the process. Today, of course, when calls are made for Southall Labour MP Sidney Bidwell's removal, for supporting the anti-immigration Select Committee Report, *Socialist Challenge* supporters are in no position to actually influence that decision. Similar sound work and then a sudden or ultimatum withdrawal from the Labour Party occurred in Hull Central CLP and other areas.

The view that black or Asian workers don't have bourgeois democratic illusions or beliefs is a myth. In fact, whilst these workers might not have the traditional commitment to the Labour Party's particular brand of social democracy — their ideas about the parliamentary change, gradualism, a neutral state etc. which underpin reformist politics, exist in similar measure. The building of fraternal relations with immigrant organisations, and encouraging membership of the Labour Party, as is being done with the Peoples National Party of Jamaica, is a method much more effective in fighting racialism in the Labour Party, challenging reformist views and strengthening the unity of action of black and white workers.

10. The final, and in some ways most important problem with Socialist Unity is its programme — or rather election address — which we reprint as an appendix. We say election address because in all the elections that SU candidates have contested, the original 'programme' adopted at the November 19th Conference, has been reprinted in varying forms as an address. Virtually all the policies and demands contained in the address we would support. But the real problem is that they do not constitute a programme. A real programme should contain an analysis of the current situation in Britain against the background of world capitalism. Equally, it should also contain a strategy and series of tactics which guide and direct people who want to know *how to fight* for the policies outlined in the election address. The 'programme' of SU fails to explain and fails to provide a united working class alternative.

Lowest Common Denominator Politics

At the Socialist Unity conference the debate on what turned out to be an election address, produced a confused series of haggles and compromises. Should the 'programme' demand workers control of bankrupt industries, nationalised industries or all. Should it demand a class size of 20 pupils. Should it support self-determination for Scotland; access for trade unions to the mass media; abolition of the House of Lords and Monarchy. Should the programme defend the "democratic opposition in the workers' states" and so on. This kind of debate was cut short at the conference by the view that SU's programme "cannot be an endless: list satisfying our ideological consciences" (Paul Thompson, Big Flame), but

something that can be put through letterboxes. David Jones (IMG) summing up said SU should have two types of programme — a kind of election address and a kind of ‘British Road to Socialism’ produced as a pamphlet. The latter kind of programme has yet to materialise.

Conclusions

What we have tried to do in the preceding ten points is to illustrate some of the internal contradictions and inconsistencies with Socialist Unity *on its own terms*. But when we return to the fundamental questions of revolutionary regroupment and workers unity with which we started we find that Socialist Unity marks a sectarian step away from this problem. In short, if you don’t accept the *electoral tactic* of opposing Labour in elections — without question (because there was no forum provided to discuss it) — then you are precluded from the debate about socialist unification. And from this tactic (which appears to constitute the primary means of intervention in the class struggle) flows the programme. Tactics determine programme in this topsy-turvy method of revolutionary politics. Many serious revolutionaries might well ask how this squares with a Marxist methodology.

At the Socialist Unity conference, where discussion on this tactic was not permitted, a leading IMG member posed the question:

“Is Socialist Unity the framework for revolutionary regroupment? Or is it the framework for building a class struggle left wing?”

Although her question remained unanswered, the practice of the SU campaign reveals that it is neither. The truth of the matter is that the collaborating tendencies are approaching the problem from the wrong end: telescoping differences of analysis, programme and perspective, producing a sectarian attitude to serious Labour Party supporters and militants, to revolutionaries who see the need to work consistently in the mass organisations, and to revolutionaries who have a different view of revolutionary regroupment and want to discuss it. This applies particularly to those who do not believe the tactic of standing in elections will advance the process of unification.

This does not mean that Marxists oppose the standing of candidates for all times and on all occasions. On the contrary, we are firmly in favour of standing candidates — but as Labour Party candidates on revolutionary politics. An alternative candidate for Marxists does not mean being able to offer the masses a new name, a new organisation, with its address, telephone number and headed note paper. It means offering a *political* alternative.

When revolutionaries have developed clearer Marxist analysis and broader base through the existing organisations of the labour movement (and those of the specially oppressed), in other words when we are actually beginning to break out of political isolation from the mainstream views of the labour movement, then a basis will exist for a real challenge to the Labour leaders on both a local and national level. Such a perspective will not merely strengthen and educate the workers’ leaders of the future but deepen the already existing unity of the working class on much more militant class struggle foundations.

The real task facing Marxists serious about regroupment and unity is the clarification of these revolutionary politics, the cornerstones of which must be a Marxist analysis of reformism and Stalinism and corresponding strategic and tactical orientations, a non-sectarian attitude to the trade unions and Labour Party, consistent internationalist work against the special oppression of women, blacks and gays including sexual politics generally. These are the rudimentary issues on which a tradition of revolutionary Marxism must be established.

On its present course, Socialist Unity can only serve to obscure and obstruct the comradely, principled and non-sectarian approach to regroupment of the divided revolutionary movement. Empty sloganising and electoral expediency are no substitutes for the less glamorous, painstaking but in the long-term more rewarding political course to revolutionary regroupment and workers unity.

Trotskyism and Sexual Politics

By Martin Cook

Introduction

The following article on *Trotskyism and Sexual Politics* needs to be placed in the context of a general reappraisal of the Trotskyist heritage and tradition, from which Socialist Charter, like many other tendencies, originated. It has become increasingly clear that the irrelevance and splintering of the Fourth International after Trotsky was not merely the fault of its poor leadership, but was linked to basic inadequacies in the body of political ideas it inherited from Russian Bolshevism and the Comintern. One of the most glaring gaps was the sex-pol field, and we feel this is linked to a tendency towards ‘economic determinism’ and ‘mechanical materialism’ among orthodox Marxists for the last 100 years; that is, an assumption that the workers of the world would be impelled towards socialist conclusions by ‘objective’ economic forces, and that ideological and ‘subjective’ factors would not play a major independent role.

This, of course, has multiple implications for the time-honoured Trotskyist analyses of reformism, Stalinism, the revolutionary party, and so on. Unlike those who would see comrades such as Lenin and Trotsky as infallible sources of authority who solved every important question once and for all, we regard them as great revolutionaries who made imperishable contributions in the fight against the orthodoxies of their own time, but nonetheless were limited by their historical situation. So to adopt a critical attitude towards them does not signify a rejection of their important gains for our movement or a smug attempt to show how ‘clever’ we are, but a break from the attitudes of religious cultism, and an honest attempt to go forward rather than jealously guarding past errors in a fossilized form.

Recently, serious critiques of Trotskyism have emerged from comrades in the Labour Party (e.g. Geoff Hodgson, Peter Jenkins), the Communist Party of Great Britain, and Big Flame. While we would hardly go along with all their views, many of their points certainly hit home. Most Trotskyists— even those most in contact with the real world—have great difficulty in making a credible response to these arguments, given their proclivity to fall back defensively on such shibboleths as the ‘crisis of leadership’ as described in the 1938 Transitional Programme, *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*. The essentials of revolutionary socialist politics *do* need to be defended—but by critically applying them to changing conditions, and not sterile orthodox dogmatism.

In the field of sexual politics it is noteworthy with what suspicion feminists and gay liberationists in Britain (no doubt elsewhere as well) regard the activities of the Trotskyist group; as arrogant, manipulative, sectarian, in fact uninterested in their own concerns. This has led, for instance, to the banning of organizationally affiliated women from some socialist feminist meetings. On the other hand there are healthy signs in parts of the far left of a new readiness to take up serious debate with both socialist feminists and radical feminists in the women’s liberation movement (WLM). We have no doubt that revolutionary Marxists will have important contributions to make to the debates in the women’s movement, but only if they can first *set their own house in order*. First and foremost, this will necessitate a sharp break from accepted Trotskyist views on women’s oppression and how to fight it.

The orthodox tradition

“Opportunist organizations by their very nature concentrate their chief attention on the top layers of the working class and therefore ignore both the youth and the woman worker. The decay of capitalism, however, deals its heaviest blows to the woman as a wage earner and as a housewife. The sections of the Fourth International should seek bases of support among the most exploited layers of the working class, consequently among the women workers. Here they will find inexhaustible stores of devotion, selflessness and readiness to sacrifice.”¹ The above well-known passage, the *only* reference to the ‘Woman Question’ in the Transitional Programme of the Fourth International, is far from being an isolated case. We can say, I think, that the absence of serious consideration of sexual politics is the most outstanding *lacuna* in the whole of the Lenin-Trotsky tradition. The contributions of communists such as Alexandra Kollontai and Wilhelm Reich have never been regarded as part of the ‘authorized canon’ or the ‘codifications’ of the movement—till recently they have hardly even been discussed. Sex-pol has simply not been recognised as a valid and distinct dimension of revolutionary praxis, as opposed to economic wage-exploitation pure and simple. It is all very well to mock the ‘orthodox’ of the *Militant* tendency or the WRP for their philistine contempt for the oppression of women *as a sex*, but they are only being consistent and loyal to their traditions. The views of the more sophisticated tendencies implicitly lead to similar conclusions, as we shall see.

It is not that comrades such as VI Lenin failed to recognise formally the existence of the special oppression of women:

.. we are aware of these needs and of the oppression of women, that we are conscious of the privileged position of the men, and that we hate—yes, hate—and want to remove whatever oppresses and harasses the working woman, the wife of the worker, the peasant woman ... and even in many respects the woman of the propertied classes.”²

Nor was Lenin adverse to movements of working women as well as a communist women’s movement:

“The party must have organs—working groups, commissions, committees, sections or whatever else they may be called— with the specific purpose of rousing the broad masses of women, bringing them into contact with the party and keeping them under its influence. This naturally requires that we carry on systematic work among the women.”³

The problem is that the aim of communist ‘women’s work’ was seen in a one-way fashion as winning women *to* the party—not necessarily as learning anything politically *from* women’s movements (we must note that there was a much sharper divide between socialist women’s organizations and liberal bourgeois ones than exists today). More fundamentally, Lenin tends to see the main problems as (a) winning legal and political equality and (b) fighting economic and social exploitation and drudgery. Matters concerning sexual liberation or the ‘politics of the personal’ are clearly regarded as peripheral at best—not to say diversionary.

This becomes appallingly obvious when we encounter Lenin’s views on the contemporary exponents of ‘sex-pol’ within the Third International. (These quotes are taken largely from Clara Zetkin’s reminiscences rather than actual ‘scripture’—however, there seems no obvious reason why she should have wanted to distort his sentiments.):

“I have been told that at the evenings arranged for reading and discussion with working women, sex and marriage problems come first ... I could not believe my ears when I heard

¹ Documents of the Fourth International 1933–40 (*Pathfinder*, 1973), p.218; The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the FI (*Transitional Programme*) (SLL, 1963), p.53.

² V.I. Lenin, *On the Emancipation of Women* (Moscow, 1965), p. 112.

³ *Ibid.*, p.110.

that... Freud's theory has now become a fad! I mistrust sex theories expounded in articles, treatises, pamphlets, etc.—in short, the theories dealt with in that specific literature which sprouts so luxuriantly on the dung heap of bourgeois society.”⁴

“This nonsense is especially dangerous and damaging to the youth movement. It can easily lead to sexual excesses, to overstimulation of sex life and to wasted health and strength of young people.”⁵

“Promiscuity in sexual matters is bourgeois. It is a sign of degeneration. The proletariat is a rising class. It does not need an intoxicant to stupefy or stimulate it, neither the intoxicant of sexual laxity or of alcohol.”⁶

And the solution?

“Young people are particularly in need of joy and strength. Healthy sports, such as gymnastics, swimming, hiking, physical exercises of every description ... This will be far more useful than endless lectures and discussions on sex problems and the so-called living by one's nature. *Mens sana in corpore sano*”⁷

Similar ideas were expressed in letters to Inessa Armand (written in 1915, not at a time of revolutionary crisis which might have been more ‘excusable’). He criticised the demand for ‘free love’ in her proposed pamphlet as being liable to be misconstrued as the ‘bourgeois’ desires for freedom from childbirth and ‘freedom to commit adultery, etc.’ (horrors!)⁸

One could have quoted at greater length these reactionary and philistine views. The aim is not, in fact, to heap mockery on Lenin and detract from his inspiring overall revolutionary record. It is not surprising, in the circumstances of the early twentieth century, that such notions should have been widespread not merely in society generally but in the revolutionary movement itself. What matters is to what extent they were combatted.

Certainly by Kollontai for a time, and no doubt others. But *not* within the mainstream Trotskyist movement, far from it. (Kollontai's works have only recently been reprinted, as often I think by feminists as by Leninist/Trotskyist organizations.) The failure to do this must be partially ascribed to the failure of the Third and Fourth Internationals to break conclusively with the economic determinism (‘mechanical materialism’) of the classic Second International. Thus the oppression of women could be explained as flowing from feudal survivals and economic backwardness:

“The electric lighting and heating of every home will relieve millions of ‘domestic slaves’ of the need to spend three — fourths of their lives in smelly kitchens.”⁹

Leon Trotsky wrote on several occasions with great insight, compassion and feeling on problems of ‘family life’ and the liberation of women in the infant Soviet state of the 1920s. Later, as we know, he was to denounce in the strongest terms the ‘Theimidor in the Family’, whereby Stalin heaped so much of the costs of his disastrous social and economic policies onto women. We have undoubtedly much to learn from his discussion of communal nurseries and restaurants, divorce, and the bringing up of children. Nonetheless, if less blatantly philistine than Lenin, he does not appear to transcend the problematic described above, of a focus confined to legal equality enforced by economic progress and industrialization. He does write:

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.101.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.104

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.107–8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.36–41.

⁹ *A Great Technical Achievement, ibid.*, p.25; cf also Celia Emerson, *Revolutionary Feminism* (Sun Press, Detroit. 1975), pp.28–35.

“That is why the proletarian Communist woman ... should devote a major part of her strength and attention to the tasks of transforming our everyday life ... it is necessary that the collective public opinion of all women be applied as pressure ...”¹⁰

Nonetheless, it does not appear that he recognised the role of an independent, *autonomous* women’s movement *alongside* the Party to mobilize the tremendous potential of women to change society. I would argue that, far from being secondary, such a development would have been the only means to overcome the horrible yawning chasm between the Bolsheviks’ impeccably progressive social legislation and the dreadful lack of economic, material resources to implement it in reality and to provide alternatives to the oppressive social structures of the past. (Incidentally, this could have contributed to the fight against the reactionary social forces—e.g. the kulaks—and the bureaucratization in the Party itself.)

“The workers’ state must become wealthier in order that it may be possible to tackle the public education of children and the releasing of the family from the burden of the kitchen and the laundry.”¹¹

This is true enough, but one-sided like much of even the best Bolshevik writing in tending to view the liberation of women as something granted *from above* by the bountiful state and party rather than achieved by the struggle of women themselves.

Once again, Trotsky does not seem to have related to sexual politics *per se*; that is, the right of women to control their own bodies, the ability of women (and men) to define their own sexuality in a liberated and yet personally responsible way. He scarcely mentioned such topics in discussions of the revolutionary movement in capitalist countries: his ‘German Writings’ are devoid of reference to Reich and the sex-pol movement, whose existence can hardly have been a secret. (Nonetheless he was prepared to take Sigmund Freud’s contribution seriously.) This can hardly be separated from the task of developing an ideological ‘counter-hegemony’ to combat the reformist Mid bourgeois world-views. Wide some of Lenin’s views as quoted above resemble the rankings of a prudish scoutmaster, Trotsky’s are often more akin to the average ‘moderate’ liberal journalist of the 1970s than to the latter-day WLM. Thus, in an article for an American magazine:

“A long and permanent marriage, based on mutual love and co-operation—that is the ideal standard.”

“Incest lessens the desirable qualities and ability to survive of the human race.”

“In the same way, the Soviet Government’s abolition of a number of laws which were supposed to protect the domestic hearth, chastity, etc. has nothing to do with any effort to destroy the permanence of the family or encourage promiscuity. It is simply a question of attaining, by raising the material and cultural level, something that cannot be attained by formal prohibition or lifeless preaching.”¹²

In the writings of Wilhelm Reich we find a valuable dissection of the lessons of the Bolsheviks’ attempts to elevate the status of women and lay down a new basis for human relations¹³ He makes a balanced and positive critique of where the efforts of the Russian comrades were inadequate, stressing as one would expect their lack of consideration to what he calls ‘sex economy’. He points out how Lenin’s views as quoted previously were used by reactionary and authoritarian elements in the Party and the state apparatus to justify propaganda for asceticism and sexual *abstinence*— which to be fair was hardly what Lenin had in mind.¹⁴ The removal of the Tsarist statutes against homosexuality could not *in itself*

¹⁰ Leon Trotsky. *Women and the Family* Pathfinder, New York, 1973), p.30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.53–55.

¹³ Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution* (Vision Press, London, 1972), pp.153–269.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.187–88.

combat the widespread popular idea of it as a ‘perversion’ or a ‘disease’. The Stalinist reaction of the early 1920s got under way before many of these problems could even be broached, let alone solved—hence there is no use harking back to a ‘Golden Age’ when ‘everything was OK’. So it is understandable if the Leninist-Trotskyist tradition, while correctly reviling Stalin’s sexual counter-revolution, has not itself embodied too many answers here. A final point that we should note is Reich’s comment on the inability of the revolutionaries themselves to face up to the contradiction between their new ideals and their ‘unreconstructed’ family ties:

“The attitude that ‘sexuality is a private matter’ was unfortunate; it was essentially an expression of the inability of the members of the Communist Party to manage the revolution in their own personal lives; therefore, they took refuge in a legal formula.”¹⁵

Again, it must be stressed that the Bolsheviks, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and other workers’ organisations carried out tremendous consistent and heroic “work among women” (sic)—often against the virulent philistinism of party leaders who thought-it all a waste of time. The comrades of the Spartacist League/US in their journal *Women and Revolution* (for instance), have performed a useful service in bringing these experiences before the movement after decades of obscurity. This is not the place to go over this ground (a lengthy task), except to stress that the movement at this time (the Comintern explicitly) usually saw sexual liberation as flowing semi-automatic ally from the dictatorship of the proletariat, rather than to be fought for in advance. The job of Marxists was seen as leading the struggle of women under capitalism for economic and political equality with male workers—thus winning them to the struggle for socialism. This was not the only position, but it *was* the dominant one and it is necessary for clarity to recognise the fact. The neglect of a specifically sex-pol dimension could only—in recent years especially—serve to divert radical women into the arms of the liberal/reformist and utopian currents of ‘feminism’.

After the victory of Nazism in 1933, Reich engaged in a brief polemic with some of the exiled Trotskyists of the Internationalische Kommunistische Deutschlands (IKD). A member of the latter had written a brief critique of his *Psychology of Fascism*. This criticized his emphasis on the importance of Hitler’s winning over the petty bourgeoisie by means of ‘mass psychology’, and accuses him in enthusiasm for sex-pol of throwing out of the window the correct political and economic arguments needed to win the proletariat to revolutionary politics. For example:

..we hold that economic factors are always and in every case the primary ones.”

“Every society is built on sexual repression; ours will be too ... Attempting to abolish it leads to chaos.”

“Although Hitler may have achieved much by exploiting these inhibitions, that is very far from proving that a frontal assault on them constitutes the best, quickest and most thorough method and that it may not be much better to circumvent these inhibitions and take things up from another angle.”¹⁶

The crude *counterposing* of sex-pol to ‘economic’ arguments—as if the real world was boxed off into watertight compartments—was well enough dealt with by Reich in his various writings, to which readers are referred. Nowhere better than in his brilliant *What is Class Consciousness?* where he warned the proponents of the Fourth International that their work would be in vain if they confined themselves to the state schemas, economic determinism, authoritarian arrangements, leadership fetishism which he felt had led the German movement to ruin. (This is not to say that we would endorse every dot and comma of his views, of course.):

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.172 (see pp.169–79).

¹⁶ Wilhelm Reich & Karl Teschitz, *Selected Sex-Pol Writings: 1934–37* (Socialist Reproduction, London, n.d.), pp.88–91.

“If one of those who oppose us ... raises the common objection that the Russian Revolution was victorious without sexual politics and mass psychology, we should immediately reply that the Russian farmers were not bourgeoisified like the American ones, nor the Russian proletariat like the English one ...”¹⁷

The Left and sex-pol today

To what extent do all these weaknesses and inadequacies of the twentieth century revolutionary tradition inform the theory and practice of the Trotskyist radical left today? To varying degrees. We should note that for forty-odd years—up to the late Sixties—sexual politics and women’s liberation were conspicuous only by their absence in the Fourth International and its spinoffs. (This applies even to the relatively sophisticated mainstream United Secretariat (USec): their 1963 re-unification document, *Dynamics of World Revolution Today*, gave the subject no mention in fifty-odd wide-ranging pages, nor even did the documents of their Ninth World Congress of 1969 — despite much emphasis on the ‘worldwide youth radicalisation’.¹⁸ It has to be *stressed*, I believe (and not in a spirit of smugness or moral superiority) that the development of a new concern with the ‘Woman Question’ in the early 1970s was a reflection of the pressure from the militantly emerging WLM of the late Sixties onwards. This has *not*, however, prompted the Trotskyists to adopt an attitude of any humility.

We will pass over the likes of the *Militant* tendency to whom women’s liberation is a nasty diversion) and the SWP (ex-IS) who aren’t *concretely* too interested in women except as militant trade unionist, ideally factory workers. For an expression of the crudest economic reductionism we need look no further than the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG). For these comrades, it is sufficient to note that it is simply the inability of capitalism to socialize domestic labour which perpetuates female inequality:

“It is the existence of privatized, individual toil in the home together with the inferior position that women occupy in social production that forms the material basis of women’s oppression under capitalism.”¹⁹

The conclusion is that the interests of women, like those of the working class as a whole, ‘can only be defended by overthrowing capitalism’ (what could be more easy?). Tunnel vision indeed, with its total neglect of ideological, social and cultural factors—like judging the art of Beethoven from a still photograph of a symphony orchestra, in this framework, the most lengthy analysis of statistics of female employment and wages and the various policies in the workers’ movement is coupled with a terse dismissal *en bloc* of the WLM—the very people who have attempted to locate the economic subordination of women in a much broader and richer perspective of sexist ideology and social relations:

“The bourgeois character of the WLM is not merely a result of its largely petit bourgeois following, but is expressed by its political stand which sees men, not capitalism, as the perpetuators of female oppression. There is no basis, therefore, in the ideas of feminism, for a common struggle with the working class to overthrow the capitalist system.”²⁰ The point is not to argue for uncritical acceptance of the views of the WLM (which, incidentally, is no more ‘petit bourgeois’ in *any* sense than most of the far left), but to recognise the real *diversity* within it obscured by this use of the Stalinist ‘amalgam technique’. The WLM encompasses revolutionary socialists, liberal reformists and radical utopian feminists as well as those whose ideas are as yet less well defined. Clarity on this is essential to the opening up of a fruitful debate from which Marxists may well have a lot to learn (as well as to contribute). The position of the RCG is significant, as it is a succinct expression of the fatal logic of the orthodox Leninist-Trotskyist

¹⁷ Wilhelm Reich, *What is Class Consciousness?* (Socialist Reproduction, London, 1973), p.62.

¹⁸ *Dynamics of World Revolution Today* (Pathfinder, N.Y., 1974), pp.25–73; *Intercontinental Press* special issue, 14.7.69.

¹⁹ Olivia Adamson, Carol Brown, Judith Harrison, Judy Price, *Women’s Oppression under Capitalism*, *Revolutionary Communist* 5 (November 1976), p.47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.42.

tradition. The WLM is to be rejected as they are merely a repeat of the suffragettes, a re-run of an old movie. So nothing is new under the sun: ‘do not adjust your mind, reality is at fault’ indeed! In the presence of such ideas it is hardly to be wondered at that many women prefer to concentrate on organizing autonomously.

There is a rather ingenious position which effectively turns the RCG line inside-out that was promoted by the erstwhile minority of the USec grouped around the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP). This avoids the need to confront orthodoxy by retreating into *sectoralism*. accepting the politics of the WLM uncritically (at a lowest common denominator level of a series of democratic reforms) as being *adequate within their own sphere*. Under a camouflage of ostensibly Marxist phraseology, the socialist revolution tends to become dissolved into a series of independent movements that club together for the cause. We must recognize the political failure as a *dual* one: abstention from providing a sharp ideological pole of attraction within the women’s movement itself against the muddleheaded confusion even of most of the better elements: but *also* from assimilating the critical ideas thrown up by the WLM as a means to re-evaluate the received doctrine of Trotskyism:

“The struggle for women’s liberation will, in its normal course of development, encompass and transcend the issues with which it began. It will merge, as a distinct current, into the general struggle of the proletariat for the socialist revolution ... It will proceed through battling over such issues as the right to full legal, political and social equality; legalized abortion and contraception; an end to bourgeois and feudal family law; equal educational opportunities; job equality and equal pay for equal work; and government- financed childcare facilities.”²¹

Implicit in the above, as in much Trotskyist literature, is the concept that history is basically on our side, the internal logic of struggle will impel the oppressed to revolutionary conclusions, and our job comes down to providing a suitable organizational framework for such struggles to develop, rather than fighting for the conscious political clarity necessary to achieve victory against the ideological strength of bourgeois reaction. What this means in practice for the SWP/US and its international co-thinkers has been frantic ‘*activism*’ around mass single-issue campaigns—in particular over abortion rights—intended to involve as many people as possible on the least political basis available. Attempts at mass agitation, that is, when patient propaganda work among labour movement and WLM activists should have been at a premium. Moreover, such a strategy tends to dissolve the genuinely *revolutionary* implications of sexual politics into a mire of liberal reformism.

So far as the majority of the USec identified with organisations such as the French Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR) and individuals such as Ernest Mandel is concerned, we must for the time being reserve judgement. A recent United Secretariat statement²² was conspicuously vague in its world round-up of women’s struggles — the political content was banal enough to be acceptable to most liberals, for instance. Yet the USF1 is a relatively innovative and heterogeneous phenomenon: there are certainly comrades doing serious work on questions of Sexual Politics and the ‘Politics of the Personal’ within various national organisations (notably the LCR). In general, a positive and often uncritical attitude to the WLM at a ‘sectoral’ level is *not* accompanied by a throughgoing break from orthodoxy as outlined previously.

The British International Marxist Group (IMG) has recently produced two statements exemplifying this approach?²³ Neither of these say a great deal one need take issue with as far as they go. Certainly the IMG has for several years been taking up issues of sexism and ideology in its journals, as well as stressing the importance of an autonomous women’s movement. Indeed, the comrades recognise for

²¹ From the major document of the Leninist-Trotskyist Faction at the USec 10th World Congress: *Dynamics of World Revolution Today*, op. cit., p.150; *Intercontinental Press* special issue, 23.12.74. pp.1762–64.

²² *Women Around World Raise Demand for Equal Rights*, in *Intercontinental Press*. 6.3.78, pp.260–61.

²³ *Revolution and Women’s Liberation, Battle of Ideas* supplement 9,3,78; Celia Pugh. Liz Lawrence, Anne Cesek, Ann Bond, *Fighting for Women’s Rights* (Socialist Woman pamphlet, London, 1977).

instance, that “Backward attitudes to women working arise from the acceptance of a woman’s role in the family.”²⁴ Nonetheless, when it comes to discussing the way forward it is stressed that struggles that lead to confronting the state and wage struggles for Equal Pay and against the Social Contract should be the main priorities. If anyone should think this is a distortion, I would point out that both these IMG documents specifically *denounce* the Labour Party and the CPGB for their emphasis on the role of sexist ideology and attitudes in perpetuating women’s oppression. Yet, at the same time, they suggest that the ideas produced by the WLM (which ones, one might ask?) are immediately *adequate* for the task of confronting male chauvinism and other prejudices in the labour movement.

An attempt to provide a theoretical rationale for these positions comes in an article by a leading comrade, of the IMG — discussing Eli Zaretsky’s *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* — goes to sophisticated lengths in erecting a rigid demarcation between the province of ‘politics’ where Marxists have a role to play, and that of social and personal life which can only be a matter of personal opinion for revolutionaries;

“Marxism rejects the notion that sexual orientation, lifestyle, personal relations, etc. are purely individual questions. However ... only if they are questions impinging on the *State* (my emphasis MCC) do they become specifically political as opposed to social.”²⁵

This superficially attractive argument effectively throws out one of the main gains of the WLM: the understanding that formal legal equalities are negated so long as women remain ideologically subordinated and trapped in the family. Furthermore, that it is precisely cultural and ideological factors which act to *prevent* both men and women coming into struggle on an overtly political and simple economic issue. Thus we are invited to fight with one hand tied behind our backs. In the day-to-day practice of the IMG the effect is for “women’s work” to collapse into propagating trade-unionist activism.²⁶ The root of this sort of approach is the view that the barriers to socialist consciousness are not very great — there is this “mass vanguard” constantly poised to surge into action and override any “obstacles of a subjective nature”.

To briefly conclude, the classic revolutionaries of the Bolshevik period could appreciate the need for special work among women, but *by and large* the *political content* of this work was not differentiated from the economic and ‘macro-political’ of the movement as a whole. Reich’s brief Sex-Pol experiment remained isolated and has not been taken up since. Latter-day Trotskyists still often reject the WLM out of hand as an alien influence. Those who do not are prone to see it as an arena of activity, a source of recruits or an extra component to be added onto the struggle like a piece of Meccano, rather than as a potential supplier of qualitatively new aspects to revolutionary politics. The problem is not posed, because in fact the overall ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie is not taken up as a central task. One is supposed to assume that the average woman or man in the street is solely concerned with the Retail Price Index and the next piece of Parliamentary legislation. The concrete ‘problems of everyday life’ are too often left for the forces of reaction to exploit in their own unpleasant way.

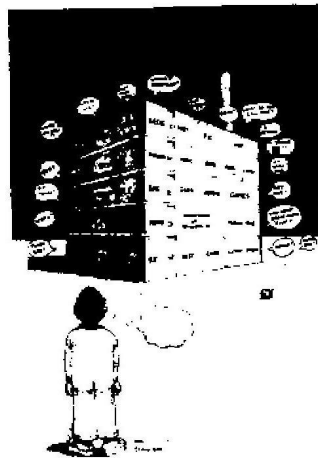
²⁴ Pugh et al, *op. cit.*, p.14.

²⁵ J. Ross in *Socialist Woman* Vol. VI no. 2 (Summer 1977). pp.9–10.

²⁶ Liz Adams, *Problems of Women and the Family*, *Chartist International* 1 (n.s.) (Autumn 1977), pp.30–31.

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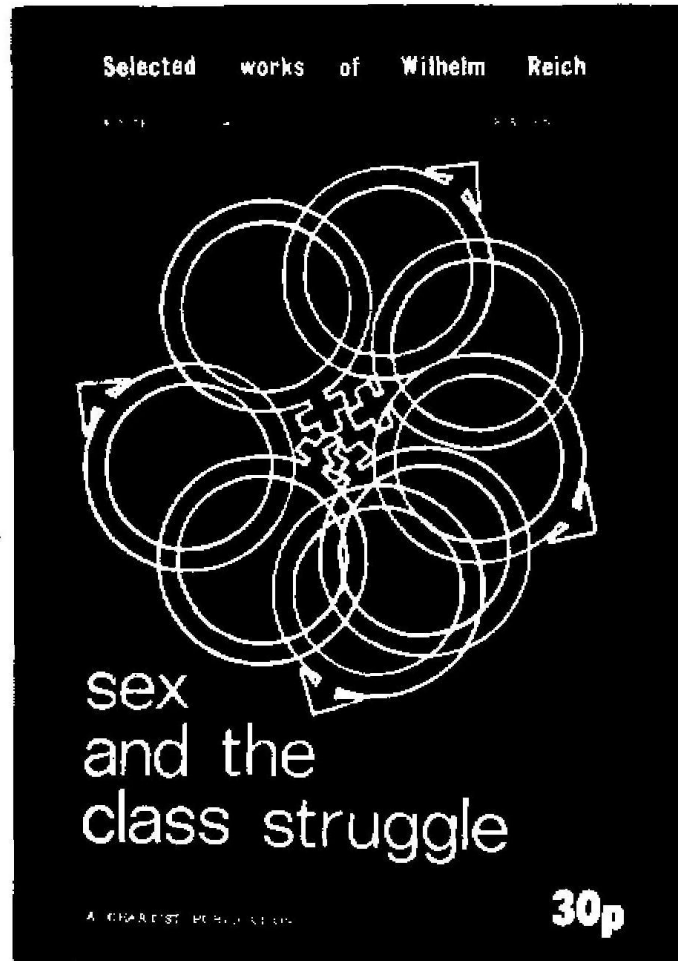


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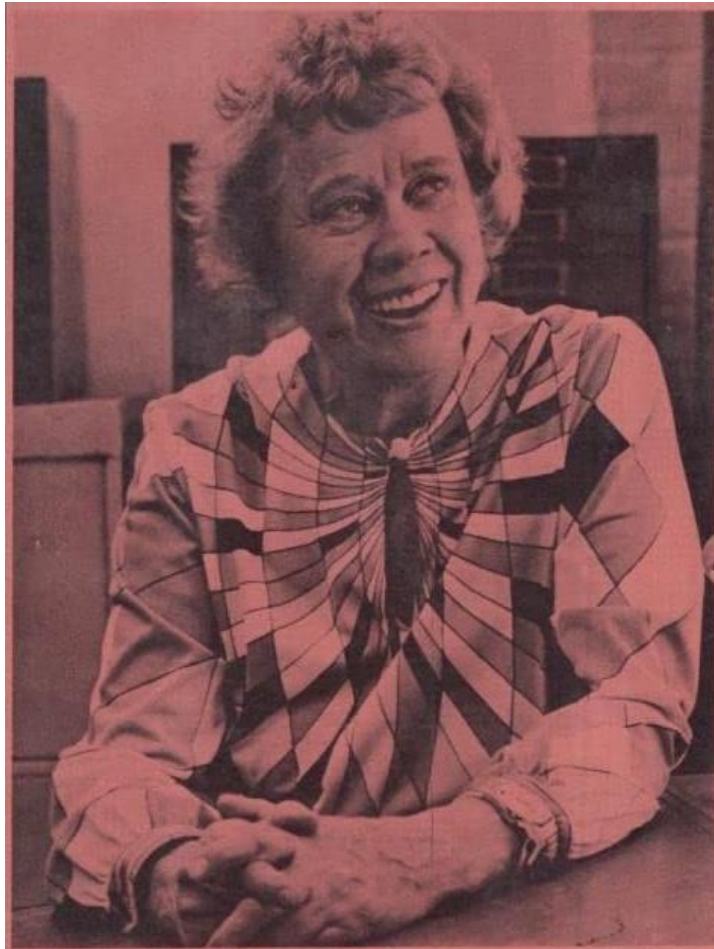
The Anthropology of Evelyn Reed

By Chris Knight

Evelyn Reed
WOMAN'S
EVOLUTION

from matriarchal clan to
patriarchal family





Evelyn Reed

Evelyn Reed has performed a service by publishing *Woman's Evolution*. Its significance is that it is the first full-length attempt to provide a Marxist account of the evolution of the family since 1884—the year of Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. An enormous amount of anthropological knowledge has been accumulated since then, so a new work on the subject was long overdue.

Having said that, it must also be stated that Reed's book is a disaster. Its only real merit is that it has reopened issues which have—scandalously—long lain dormant, forcing many feminists and socialists to face once again the real issues of human evolution and potentiality which were taken up by Engels but have been almost forgotten by Marxists ever since.

To pose the issues is one thing, but to answer them adequately is quite another. Reed's answers to the fundamental problems of anthropological theory are—despite the very best of intentions—bizarre, arbitrary, at variance with almost everything which Engels wrote as well as with modern bourgeois anthropology and of little or no use to the women's movement. It simply is not good enough to start with a few ideological preconceptions and then—with the help of snippets of “quotations” culled from here, there and everywhere—to force the facts into the conceptual box. If it is to conquer bourgeois anthropology, Marxist anthropology must show that it is *more* honest, *more* firmly based on the evidence and capable of explaining *more* of the total body of evidence than any other theoretical school. A theory which is compelled to keep excluding evidence and hiding facts from view will get nowhere at all.

The Hunter Cultures

Evelyn Reed hides from view the greater part of human history. For at least ninety per cent of our period of existence on this planet, we human beings have lived as hunters of big game animals. The Upper Palaeolithic—the period in which (particularly clearly in northern Spain, France and much of eastern Europe) culture in the form of large collective settlements, burials, cave paintings, complex kinship organizations and so on quite “suddenly” flowered—this period was one in which ice covered much of the ground, vegetable food was not abundant and humans depended for their existence upon the hunting of extremely large animals, including mammoths. It was in this period (which came to an end only about eight to twenty thousand years ago) that the final transition to fully-human status took place. Men and women of large-brained, fully-human type (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) spread into Siberia, over the Bering Straits into North and then South America, into Australia and into virtually every other habitable part of the globe. In Australia, the climate was quite different from what it is today, being far more well-watered and fertile, and the earliest Australians were able to hunt many now-extinct huge forms of marsupial, such as *the Diprotodon*—a sort of giant kangaroo. Many of these giant marsupials continued to be hunted for thousands of years, probably from about 50,000 years ago to as recently as 8,000 or so years ago. About 11,000 years ago in North America, hunters killed mammoths, giant bison and possibly many other now-extinct giant species. The animals present in the continent at about the time of the Palaeo-Indian's arrival (much earlier) included *Titanotylopus* (a huge form of camel), horses, bison, mastodons, llamas, ground sloths (including a giant the size of an elephant), beavers, short Taced bears, armadillos, several sabre-toothed cats, shrub oxen, moose, tapirs, antelope and many more large species. These provided hunters' paradise and were hunted so successfully and for so long that eventually the effect of human hunting began to tell and the giant species began to become extinct. They were hunted collectively by being surrounded with fire or driven over cliffs or into pits or trenches where they were speared. Multiple kills were often made, and the animals were so large that huge supplies of meat (which kept well in the cold weather) must have been obtained. The slow maturation rate (and gestation periods) of the giants made them vulnerable to extinction relatively sooner than smaller, faster-breeding species, and their size became a handicap as it was this which must have attracted their human predators.

In all the world's continents, the pattern appears to have been roughly the same: giant mammals survived into the late Pleistocene and then gradually became extinct. There is no doubt whatsoever that early humanity was able to hunt much larger species than has been possible in recent times, and that we ourselves as a species contributed to the extinction of the game animals on which we had originally most depended for much of our food. If we want to picture the kind of life with which Stone Age humanity spearheaded the conquest of the animal kingdom and led the advance of *Homo sapiens*, we must imagine, not scattered, small bands of nomads hunting relatively small animals, with hunters acting individually or in small parties, but large groups of big game hunters positioning themselves close to water-holes of other spots where the game congregated in great masses. These human groups would have had fixed, or seasonally-fixed, home-bases—sometimes cave-dwellings—protected by fire, where the women and children could stay while the men were out hunting. Weapons were perhaps crude and unwieldy by later standards (although not always so) but, to make up for this, hunting itself was a tremendously *organized* and *collective* activity producing large supplies of meat. There is no need to assume economic scarcity under these conditions: on the contrary, it is likely that the hunters were able to assume a relative abundance of game and to adjust their behaviour to correspond with this assumption.

It is now some time since there existed, anywhere in the world, the large herds of wild big game necessary to sustain that kind of way of life. The hunter-gatherers who have survived into the twentieth century hunt for the most part relatively small animals either in small hunting parties or with hunters acting alone. The fact that they find it possible to hunt without large-scale organization and collective techniques testifies to the relative sophistication of their weapons—bows and arrows, poison darts, blow-guns and so on. Of course, it is dangerous to generalise here: some cultures have survived with the crudest technologies, and collective game-drives have often been reported within the ethnographic present. But the fact remains that modern hunter-gatherers give no picture at all of the way of life most characteristic of Paleolithic humankind. With few exceptions, they rely to a very large extent on vegetable foods gathered by women and children—a mode of life ruled out for most of the time to the Ice-Age mammoth-hunters of Northern Europe and Siberia, or to the Palaeo-Indians who entered North America by way of the Bering Straits (where there was virtually *no* vegetable food edible to humans available). For surviving hunter-gatherers to obtain wild vegetable foods, large expanses of territory have often to be combed. The best technique is typically to scatter widely into small family groups, or for bands of a dozen or more individuals to roam about, each having relatively little contact with its neighbours for much of the time. Such nomadic habits have undoubtedly contributed to a blurring of older residence-patterns and to a general loss of complexity in forms of social organization. Only where hunters have developed some horticulture has the resulting residential stability enabled something of the structure of the more complex cultural heritage to be retained.

Hunting and the Power of Women

The ancient cultural heritage of the big-game hunters included the principle of matriliney but it was not really based on it. The matriliney rule is a rule of exchange, but it is only a rule of procreative exchange—of the exchange of human offspring. Matriliney means that men's own offspring do not belong to them. Men have to surrender the children whom they father, receiving back in exchange shared rights in different children—the children of their sisters. This rule is important, but much more important to the ancient hunters was its *economic* aspect—the rule which denied men rights in their *economic* produce, the animals which they killed themselves. The “own kill” rule was a universal component of the ancient hunter-cultures. It meant that men could never eat the game which they themselves had “produced” surrendering this to their wives’ (i.e. their sexual partners’) kinsfolk, but receiving in exchange the game animals which their own kinsfolk (mothers and sisters) had obtained. The “own kill” rule survives today mainly in the form of the principles of “sacrifice”, “totemism”, “hunters’ taboos” and so on and

so forth, but even today in most hunter-gatherer cultures it is considered quite wrong for men to kill animals merely in order to eat them themselves. Even where men do eat their own kills, they feel it necessary to make atonement for doing so, to “apologise” to the “souls” of the animals concerned, to make “offerings” of the meat to spirits or ancestors before eating any, to retain at least one species of animal (the so-called “totem” species) to which the “own kill” rule fully applies or to pay lip-service to the ancient norms in some other way.

But the nomadic, scattered way of life of modern hunter-gatherers has destroyed the one thing upon which the “own kill” rule (along with matriliney) most depended. The Upper Palaeolithic cultures were relatively settled, in the sense that the caves and other shelters used were inhabited continuously for long periods of time. In each settlement, a *community of women* could form. Archaeological remains show how “long-houses” were built, and how the women’s hearths were arranged in rows together, clearly indicating that groups of matrilineally-related women formed the nuclei of the large households to which the menfolk brought the produce of the hunt. It was these collectively-organized groups of women who controlled the “magic” of fire, and who alone (we can imagine) had the right to cut up the meat and make it available (by cooking) as food. The “own kill” rule was, from this standpoint, the rule that once men had killed an animal, [TEXT OBSCURED] them no more. They had no right [TEXT OBSCURED] and very likely no right to cut it up or distribute it at all. All that was in the women’s hands. The women took the children (matriliney) and the game animals (the “own kill” or meat-exchange rule), leaving their husbands with nothing. Even sexual favours were conditional upon the efforts of the men in hunting. For their rights in children and in cooked meat, these husbands had to go back to a *different* group of women, their clan-“sisters”. You could only eat with your own kin, not with non-kin (such as wives or in-laws). Even today, this is one of the fundamental principles of kinship in all societies which can be said to be “kinship-based”, despite the fact that nowadays the rule is often evaded or overlaid in practice. But this rule of separation at meals meant that the men in each kin-group were dependent upon their kinswomen for their meals. Hence the kinsmen had a deep interest in defending at all times their sisters against the unmarried, non-kin husbands of these sisters. Their meals depended on it. It was the control of the *fire* and hence of the *food-distribution system* which enabled the women to set men as brothers in balanced opposition against men as husbands in this way, thereby negating the dominance of the male sex as a whole. And it is this *economic* as well as *sexual* system of “total exchange” which the “matriarchal” system (a bad term, since it implies rule by women instead of equality) represents.

The disappearance of the big game animals meant the breakup of the ancient women’s communities. Foraging for wild vegetable foods meant that (except where horticulture had become possible) groups became nomadic or semi-nomadic. Small bands or family groups had to cover wide territories and therefore had to scatter widely in search of food. The women in this way became split up. A husband would depend on his wife or wives for food (the inverse of the previous pattern), so that men stayed with their wives, relinquishing their sisters. The “protectors” of women became their husbands, no longer brothers. But this meant that women could no longer protect themselves *against* their sexual partners, because their (theoretical) “protectors” *were* their sexual partners themselves. The whole process of exchange which had created a *balance* between the sexes began to collapse. When this process of disintegration first began, attempts were made again and again to restore the power of the ancient feminine communities. But no matter how many “mother-goddess” figurines were carved or placed under hearths, no matter how many feminine or fertility cults were developed, these compensatory rituals could never really compensate for the real feminine communities whose power was ebbing away. All the rituals of the Australian Aborigines centre around the ancient notions of the power of women, but it is pure ritual, bearing little relation to the way in which men in practice treat their wives in the present day. The same applies to the hunter cultures—or what is left of them — of all parts of the world. In ritual, men try to conjure up the powers of women (even, often, to the point of artificially “menstruating” by subincising the penis), but to little avail. It is economic necessity which ultimately determines the forms of social life, and this is something which no amount of religion can deny or change.

Evelyn Reed's Argument

Now, what has all this to do with Evelyn Reed? Unfortunately, nothing. Or at any rate very little. But this is because Evelyn Reed's book has almost nothing to do with reality at all. Wherever a relationship with reality is discernible, it turns out to be an inverse one—the evidence is turned on its head. Evelyn Reed hides from view virtually all the evidence relating to the early big-game hunting cultures on the grounds that hunting was the work of men. Having apparently never conceived the possibility of the “own kill” rule, and knowing almost nothing of what happens even in those hunter-cultures which have survived into recent times, she imagines that men simply ate their own kills, women playing no part in the exchange-processes which the hunting economies involved. Starting out with this disastrous misconception, Evelyn Reed then proceeds to do all possible to blot out, obscure and minimize the significance of hunting in the evolution of the human race.

This is how Evelyn Reed “proves” the former existence of what she calls “the matriarchy”:

“The matriarchy was the necessary first form of social organization because women were not only the procreators of new life but also the chief producers of the necessities of life” (*Woman's Evolution*, p.xv).

Reed argues that in earliest times, men were of little or no economic importance. She attacks all those anthropologists who “could not see that in the period of the maternal clan, when men were preoccupied with hunting and fighting, women were the principal producers of the necessities of life for all the members of the community” (p.104). The bulk of the food-producing was done by women. Consequently women were the most important sex.

Now, is this argument convincing? Does it make sense to talk of “hunting and fighting” as if both forms of male “violence” were the same sort of thing? Or does it strike the reader as mere feminist myth-making and dogma? How on earth can men have been economically unimportant at a time when big game hunting was humanity's vital source of food and the activity around which both tool-making and social organization primarily centred? Reed's “answer” is to bolster up one factually hopeless assertion with an even more ludicrous one. According to her, the women just “chose” not to eat the meat which the male hunters caught:

“... in the matriarchal period women decided for themselves whether they would eat meat, and usually they did not” (p.93).

Reed speaks of “the long-drawn-out resistance of women to eating meat or even eating together with men who were eating meat” and, discussing “vegetable dishes”, asserts:

“Such foods were the preference of primitive women at all times except for ritual occasions, when it seems to have been far more a duty than a desire for the women to swallow morsels of meat” (p.72).

Evelyn Reed suggests that women may have “excluded themselves from having anything to do with a food that repelled them”, the repellent food in question being, of course the meat killed by the violent males (p.73). In this way, the women demonstrated their complete economic separation from and independence of the opposite sex:

“Since neither women nor young children depended upon meat for their food, they were not dependent upon male hunters for their subsistence”, (p.83).

So there were two quite separate economic systems—a male one, and a female one:

“The males are the hunters and eaters of flesh foods, the females the collectors and eaters of vegetable foods” (p,137)

Neither economic system had any necessary connection with the other—and, in fact, the females (according to Reed) avoided the males as much as they could. Reed cites no evidence whatsoever for this extraordinary theory beyond a few “quotations” relating to the Akikuyu and the Masai, along with one or two other *modern* “tribal” cultures of evidently male-dominated types (p.72). Even in the case of these cultures, however, Reed’s idea of two economies unconnected with each other does not apply.

Reed’s theory is supposed to apply to the hunter cultures of the palaeolithic. Now, can we seriously imagine that women “chose” not to eat meat, when the ability to utilize this food- source was the supreme benefit conferred by the mastery of artificial tools (hunting weapons etc.)— the great technological breakthrough which laid the basis for the emergence from an animal to a human way of life? Can we really believe that only the male sex benefited from this breakthrough, while the women’s “maternal functions and sentiments” (as Reed puts it —p.71) “... caused them to lag behind in their diet, retaining the vegetable food of the primates”? According to Reed, the economic basis of the transition from animal to human life never touched the female sex at all. The transition from ape-like vegetable-gathering to organized, collective hunting concerned only the men. Reed asserts that the (supposed) refusal of the women to progress in this respect was a positive thing:

“The fact that females, like their ape forebears, continued to collect vegetation instead of hunting and killing animals may have played a highly salutary role under the circumstances” (p.70)

Reed means to say that killing was dangerous, both to the women’s offspring and to wild animals, and that the females, being uninvolved in killing, were in a good position to put up barriers against it (p.70). Does it even begin to make sense to speak of hunting as “killing” in this way? Can anyone take seriously Reed’s idea that both human children and wild animals needed protecting from this “killing” at the same time? And can it be imagined that the earliest human females made the transition to humanity by continuing to gather wild vegetable foods “like their ape forebears”? No specialists have doubted that, in many hunter cultures at many times during the year, the gathering of wild vegetable foods was useful and essential, and that it was mainly women and children who were responsible for this. But whether in the form of chipped stone handaxes, spear-heads, earth-traps filled with bones, tools for scraping hides, archaeological kill-sites, butchering sites or paintings on cave-walls—the evidence for the importance of meat food to early human society is overwhelming. Only a writer without training in anthropology, with scant regard for the methods of science and with a purely “ideological” aim in view could claim that throughout a period of tens and even hundreds of thousands of years women and children “lagged behind”, continuing despite the hunting going on all around them to live like monkeys and apes, picking and grubbing for berries and roots so as to prove their “independence” of men.

But Reed’s real argument is a moral rather than a factual or scientific one. She believes in what she calls “the individualistic and competitive character of male sexuality” (p-49), “the violence of male sexuality in the natural state” (p.64) and so on. Counter posed to such characteristics are the non-violent, biologically co-operative “maternal functions” and “sentiments” of women (p.71). “Only the women” we are told, “possessed maternal functions and sentiments” (p.71), and it was these which caused women to “lag behind” where hunting was concerned and to single-handedly bring about the transition from animal to human life as a result. Never could an inversion of reality have been more total. Reed understands nothing of the fact that it was women who made human big- game hunting possible, who initiated the hunting expeditions, who demanded the meat, took the meat when it was brought home, skinned the animals, treated the hides, made clothing, cooked the meat, distributed the food, organized (with their brothers) the systems of meat-circulation and exchange and so on. In Reed’s view, the hunting of animals was just another form of “male violence”, associated in the “matriarchal period” with rampant cannibalism.

Cannibalism Violence and Male ‘Nature’

Reed notes that there is in “primitive” societies a widespread custom according to which husbands are prevented from eating with their wives or in-laws. The actual reason for this is that it is simply an aspect of the “own kill” rule where hunter-cultures are concerned. A man brings his kills to the camp of his wife and his wife’s kin. But here, with non-kin, he is not allowed to eat. Various taboos (e.g. the “mother-in-law taboo”) prevent him from ever eating with his in-laws. He must provide for these in-laws (in this way *earning* whatever sexual rights he is given), but cannot take meat from them. If a man were permitted to eat with his wife and her kin, he would be eating his own kills. The whole system of game-exchange would break down.

Reed understands nothing of all this, having not even a glimmering of an awareness of the “own-kill” rule. In her view, the hunters had to be kept away from their wives and children because otherwise they would have eaten them. She interprets the separation of husbands from wives and children at mealtimes among even existing, surviving tribal cultures in these horrifying terms (any tribal peoples who got to read Reed’s book would tear it up in indignant anger). Quoting Crawley, who asked why “according to a very general custom” men and women are separated at meal-times in present-day tribal societies, Reed replies:

“The answer is that the food segregation of the sexes is only the most conspicuous part of the general segregation of the hunters from the mothers and children in the epoch of cannibalism” (p.84).

According to Reed, the “trail of cannibalism extends from the beginning of the palaeolithic era to its end” (p.27). She also quotes approvingly a statement by Julius Lippert to the effect that cannibalism “once covered the entire earth” and “is widespread over the whole of Oceania as far as Malaysia, and in America it extends from south to north, reaching its climax in the civilised states of the center” (p.25). But according to Reed, it is also true that “the maternal system ... dates from the beginnings of humankind” (p.xiv). The whole of the early “matriarchal period”, in other words, was one in which men were eating one another. The men of this period— whom Reed calls “cannibalistic hunters”—were shunned and tabooed. They were the “contaminating sex” (p.101). Children had to be kept away from their fathers, who might eat them at any moment:

“The segregation of ‘father and child’ was originally a segregation of children still in the care of their mothers from adult men, who were hunters and warriors. It cannot be understood except as a survival of the epoch of cannibalism.

The dangers to the children are reflected in the curious rituals performed around the lying-in mother and child ... women were confronted with the real problem of protecting infants and children from hungry predators, both animal and human. They solved the human part of the problem by segregating themselves and their offspring ...” (pp.140–141).

According to Reed, one of the most important functions of fire was to enable women to keep at bay hungry fathers who would otherwise have eaten their own offspring (pp.145–148). Being unaware of the “own kill” rule, Reed does not realize that the custom of denying men rights in their offspring has a far less lurid meaning. She does not realize that men had to be denied rights in their own economic produce — i.e. the animals they killed—and that, to do this, it was inevitable that they should also be denied (by their in-laws) rights in their own “sexual produce” (i.e. their own offspring), as well as property-rights in their wives or wives’ kin generally.

Among the Sharanahua of Peru, the women of a village collectively initiate hunting expeditions by sexually challenging the men—the implication being that a sort of “sex strike” will be enforced unless the men go off and bring back some meat. In all the ancient hunter cultures of the world, wherever hunting was a collective activity, something of this kind took place. A complete ban on sex was enforced

(the men agreeing to this) until a successful outcome to the hunt could be announced. Reed notices this, but comes to her usual bizarre conclusions. According to Reed, what was involved was not a sex-strike, but a horrified response on the part of some women to the fact that the men were ready to go about “killing”. While in reality, it was the women who initiated the hunt by beginning to sexually “freeze out” their husbands, Reed sees everything upside down and imagines that the men spontaneously began to feel violent about everything, whereupon the womenfolk began rushing to protect their children and shutting themselves away. According to Reed:

“... it was the women who laid down the edict that they were not to be approached at times when the men were engaged in the dangerous and contaminating occupation of hunting and killing.

And it was more than a mere sexual avoidance. It was a total taboo that prevented men from having any kind of association with women. Its object was to prevent hunters or warriors from coming into contact with women and children whenever they were embarked upon killing expeditions. Even more fundamental than sexual intercourse was the rule of avoidance of food intercourse, for it was primarily against cannibalism that the taboo was directed” (pp.87–88).

With arbitrary and unsubstantiated nonsense such as this it is impossible to know what to do.

From earliest times, according to Reed, women had attempted to make men feel guilty about “killing”
The violence had to be stopped, and

“it was the females, with their highly developed maternal functions and their inhibitions with regard to eating meat, who led the way” (p.73).

This is Reed’s utterly original explanation for “totemism” which, she tells us, was “the earliest social institution” (p.37). Not realizing that “totemism”, to the extent that it is anything at all, is a form of breakdown of the “own kill” rule—a way of evading it, and a form of religious escape from the ancient hunting norms rather than “the earliest social institution”—Reed invents an immense problem which has to be solved, and boldly constructs her own theory. Her starting point, once again, is universal cannibalism. This cannibalism, we are told, was “innocent”, because men were not eating their own kinsfolk but only their own wives, children and other non-kin people (you had to marry non-kin and your children were nonkin). Reed explains:

“Those who were of the same kin were of the same kind, human beings. Outsiders, non-kin, were members of a different kind, i.e. animals. This kinship criterion established the boundaries of cannibalism. The lives of all members of the horde or kin-community were sacred and inviolable; kinsmen could never kill or eat other kinsmen. They could only kill and eat outsiders or non-kin who were regarded as animals” (p.30).

For this reason, cannibalism never seemed like cannibalism to the cannibals themselves. They were always eating non-kin (e.g. their own wives and children), who were only “animals” like other animals which were hunted:

“Under these circumstances savages were not cannibalistic according to their comprehension of what constituted human beings. Since kinsmen never killed or ate other kinsmen, this was equivalent to a total taboo on cannibalism. When we speak of cannibalism in the epoch of savagery we must bear in mind this limited conception of humanity which made the men of those days unwitting or innocent cannibals” (p.31).

Now, according to Reed, it was to achieve this level of cannibalism (as opposed to absolutely indiscriminate cannibalism) that women established the taboos of totemism in order to prevent men from eating their own kin (although this would *not* have prevented the men from eating their own wives or offspring).

Reed's argument runs as follows. First, men in this period were incapable of discerning the differences between two-legged creatures of their own kind on the one hand, and bison, deer—or cuttlefish—on the other. Reed writes:

“It may seem incredible that humans at any stage of development could fail to see the essential differences between themselves and animals. But in remote ages men and animals were closely associated; they lived together in the primal forest and their necessities were the same to a large extent. Even at a higher stage of evolution, savages continued to credit animals with an intelligence and capability similar to their own” (p.29).

We are presented with a picture of “savages”—including modern ones—so myopic as to be unable to tell the difference between man and beast. Reed quotes the following words of Frazer to back up her argument:

“This incapacity to distinguish between a man and a beast, difficult as it is for us to realize, is common enough, even among savages who have not the totemic system. A Bushman, questioned by a missionary, “could not state any difference between a man and a brute—he did not know but a buffalo might shoot with bows and arrows as well as a man if it had them.” When the Russians first landed on one of the Alaskan Islands the natives took them for cuttlefish “on account of the buttons on their clothes.” (pp.29–30)

It is a pity the Bushmen are not given a chance to answer back. As to what the Alaskan Islanders would say, it is hard to imagine. But we must try to follow Reed's argument. “Savages’ were incapable of distinguishing humans from beasts.

Therefore, to stop them from eating humans, it was as well to stop them eating beasts as to do anything else. To do this, the women got the men to confuse themselves with particular *species* of animals, so that one group of men was confused with, say, the bear, another with the deer and so on. One group of men thought of the bear as their kin, another believed they were kinsfolk of the deer, another felt they were descended from beavers etc. etc. The men were then prohibited from killing or eating their animal “kinsfolk”. They could still eat non-kin (i.e. those whom they married), but the great value of totemism was that “it eradicated any possibility that a kinsman would hunt, kill or eat another kinsman” (p.38) Men could now eat their wives, but not their sisters:

“All hunting, whether for food or for mates, was expelled from the community. The brothers had to go outside the community of kin to hunt “animals”; they could only eat “strange flesh”. Curiously enough, the term “strange flesh” applied also to mates, i.e. women who were not of their own kin” (pp.174–5).

What are we to make of all this? To some readers—brought up since infancy to imagine “savages” as cannibals before all else—it might seem plausible enough. However, that anyone claiming to be a Marxist should write such stuff is almost beyond belief. As far as cannibalism goes, no-one would deny that many tribespeople treated real “outsiders” occasionally as fair game. And if it is permissible to kill people, why not eat them, too? Brotherhood has never yet been established on an international scale. The “sanctity of human life” has rarely transcended the boundaries of restricted tribes or cultures, and in that sense, men have always treated other men occasionally no better than they would treat animals. However, it is among *horticultural* tribes, not among hunter-gatherers, that “headhunting” and regular cannibalism has been fairly prevalent. Among hunters, cannibalism as a means of gaining

food is virtually unknown. To find evidence of widespread cannibalism among regular meat-eaters, it is necessary to go way back to before the Upper Palaeolithic, back to *Homo erectus* and beyond—to the period *before* the race had become fully and completely human. Reed's whole case, however, rests on the view that everything was the reverse of this, that cannibalism and big game hunting were the same kind of thing, that horticulture led to a decline of cannibalism and so on. Reality is inverted, point by point. Reed's view is that even after "the first social institution" ("totemism") had been established, men were still fully entitled to eat their wives and offspring on the grounds that these were non-kin. The whole "matriarchal period"—stretching from the earliest humans to the early agricultural civilisations—was continuously being threatened by "killing" and "cannibalism". And it is on this basis that Reed's strange theory of "totemism" is erected.

Are we really to believe that a South African Bushman, who could tell from the faintest traces on the ground not only the exact species but also the approximate age, condition and probable location of his animal quarry, might mistake a buffalo for a human being? Or are we to believe that an Alaskan Islander or other "savage", seeking a few moments of innocent sexual pleasure, could have been so stupid as to mistake a human female for a *cuttlefish*? Are there really any reports of attempted sexual intercourse with cuttlefish? Or perhaps with bears or buffaloes? Reed's idea that "savage" males were incapable of distinguishing human females from animals is baffling. She naively accepts at face value the most ridiculous allegations by Victorian missionaries and explorers (note how *little* use is made of modern ethnological reports) as to the crude mental level of "savages". Can we really take seriously the idea that a taboo on eating *animals* was the only way in which men could be stopped from eating *each other*. Could there not have been a simpler, more direct, way of achieving the end in view? And finally, even if we accept Reed's argument, is it not somewhat disappointing to learn that the supreme act in the transition from Nature to Culture—the establishment of "the first social institution"—was the setting up of a food taboo which in any case allowed a man with the clearest conscience to eat his wife, his children, his mother-in-law and all of his in-laws? Isn't it rather difficult in this light to understand how the human race survived?

It has to be admitted that Reed herself, later in the book, seems to become aware of such difficulties. To get around the problem of wives being eaten by their husbands, she changes her mind about the confusion of humans and animals and suddenly introduces the argument that only men could be so confused. Although men imagined *other men* to be animals, "there is no equivalent documentation, however, on women having ever been conceived as 'animals'" (p.280). Women were, from the very beginning, conceived as human beings, we are now told. So now, men *ate* their brothers-in-law, but only had sex with the sisters of these unfortunate men. But isn't this an equally impossible contradiction? Whenever Reed gets herself into a contradiction, she describes it as "a paradoxical situation", imagining that it existed in reality rather than in her own mind. As she writes of the taboo on eating women:

"This produced a paradoxical situation. One group of men killed and ate men of another group who were 'strange flesh'. At the same time these men, as 'strange flesh', were eligible as mates for their sisters" (p.277).

Reed describes this as a "peculiar relationship which existed", unaware that the peculiarity is hers, not that of the "savages" about whom she is supposedly writing. It should hardly need saying that at no "stage" in human evolution has eating one's brother-in-law really been approved of. Needless to say, Reed gets around the problem of how men could have eaten the people to whom they were presenting their sisters as wives by the invention of a further "taboo". But Reed's need to keep adding afterthoughts and arbitrary assertions in order to clear up contradictions as she goes along only emphasizes the hopelessness of the underlying theoretical presuppositions on which her contorted arguments are based.

Method

Reed's hair raising theories stem from the most disastrous defects of method. It is not an exaggeration to say that Reed has taken advantage of *none* of the theoretical achievements which anthropology has made over the last fifty or so years. The great names of twentieth century anthropology might as well never have lived. Reed's methods belong to the curio-collecting, quotation-mongering, arbitrary theory-spinning traditions established by such figures as J.F.McLellan or J.G.Frazer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Any modern book of Marxist anthropology would have to begin by seriously dealing with such modern "giants" of bourgeois anthropology as Claude Lévi-Strauss, taking up their ideas in order to transcend them. But Evelyn Reed has not even presented the ideas of Lévi-Strauss to her readership, let alone effectively criticized them. Instead, his and other modern ideas are dismissed with a few derogatory remarks aimed from a nineteenth century pre-Marxist and non-Marxist *standpoint*.

Having read *Reed's book*, can any reader new to the *subject* have gained a clear idea of what "matriarchy" or a matrilineal descent-system entails? No such clarity is provided. Nowhere is a given matrilineally-organized community systematically analysed or even described, although (for anyone interested) there is excellent material available on the Western Pueblo Indians, the Ge Indians (mostly matrilineal) of the eastern highlands of Brazil, the Truk Islanders, the Menangkabau of Sumatra and many, many others. Instead, we have a jumble of isolated "quotations" (the entire book hobbies from one quotation to the next), often from the most dubious sources, and usually relating to almost entirely unconnected times and places on earth. This intrinsic arbitrariness in the selection of "facts" makes it impossible to form any idea of how the interdependent economic, social and sexual relations and mechanisms within a given matrilineally-organized community actually *function*. Everything is ripped out of its context. Reed tries to make an economic fact of life in one kind of social system actually appear to be the economic basis of quite another kind. For example, in the course of "proving" that the "matriarchal system" rested on the overriding importance of women's labour in gathering wild vegetable foods (the reverse is the case), Reed cites Frazer to the effect that "it is generally considered the province of women to dig roots" (p.107; see also pp.105-6). In Australia (as amongst most hunter-gatherers who have survived), it is the women whose food-gathering provides the overwhelming bulk of the food-supply. Reed forgets, however, to mention a small detail—no-where on the Australian continent have we an example of a matriarchal (or even matrilineal-matrilocal) social system. It is true that Aboriginal women work hard—but many authorities have described this in many regions as a form almost of slavery: the system is extremely male-dominated, the males using their wives as drudges, forcing them to do all the heavy work. No reader of Reed's book would realize this. The method is one of "well-intentioned" distortion.

In the same chapter, Reed notes the traditional division of human history into two main epochs: the food-gathering (hunting etc.) and the food-producing (farming) epochs, with a transitional horticultural (small-scale gardening) period in between. Having noted this distinction, Reed then obliterates it for all practical purposes. For we are told that throughout all these different periods, women's labour predominated, as a result of which the same social system (matriarchy) prevailed. Just why it should be considered inescapable that the sex which is the materially productive one must by that very fact be emancipated and predominate socially is not explained. In class-societies, are the materially productive classes necessarily the ruling classes? Isn't it more usually the other way round? And was it not the view of Marx and Engels that class-exploitation *begins* with the economic and sexual exploitation of women by men? But for Reed, such notions are unimportant. Women did all the work, so they "must" have been emancipated. And women (argues Reed) did essentially all the work from the earliest beginnings of human evolution into the early stages of agriculture and civilization. Throughout all these stages of technological and economic evolution, women's labour predominated, as a result of which the same social system (matriarchy) prevailed. In this context, the economy of the Australian Aborigines is lumped together in the same section (entitled "Control of the Food Supply", pp.106-110) with the neolithic revolution and the domestication of animals. It is all, after all, "primitive society or "the matriarchal period". When human beings were living in caves, hunting large game and wearing skins, the matriarchal

clan system prevailed (“the maternal clan system was the original form of social organization” and “dates from the beginning of humankind”—pp.xiii, xiv). Millennia later, when early agriculture and the neolithic revolution were underway *women were not only still in charge but “reached the apex of their influence and prestige”* (p.411). Going back now in the opposite direction, to when (according to Reed) man-apes were bludgeoning each other in sexual fights for access to females, feminine emancipation was no less universal: for the “sexual freedom of female apes and other animals who mate at their own will and with any number of males they choose testifies that, in nature, males do not dominate females” (p.53) Reed lumps all animal species together to form one undifferentiated mass and then proceeds to discuss “animal behaviour”, “the animal family” and so on. We are given statements like: “Animal behaviour, fashioned by nature’s mode of survival, is preponderantly individualistic and competitive” (p.45). Or again: “A careful study of animal life and behaviour shows that it is not the female animal but the male animal that suffers from a biological liability” (p.44). The same methods are used to discuss animals as are used to discuss human cultures: instead of distinguishing one species from another species of animal (noting, for example, that ants- or beavers-organize co-operatively in a way that, say, baboons do not), Reed simply lumps all “animals” together and proceeds to discuss the form of behaviour of this general mass. The general conclusion, naturally, is that the general mass is “matriarchal”: “So far as the females are concerned, no male, including the dominant male, can control their lives and sexual activities” (p.52). Or again: “The animal ‘family’ is no more than a maternal brood, with the mother alone providing for herself and her offspring” (p.53). Matriarchy, in other words, is “natural”. It is a biological inheritance of the human species, rooted in biological need. Exactly the same methods as those used by Robert Ardrey, Desmond Morris, E.O.Wilson and others (the “male dominance is natural” school) are adopted by Evelyn Reed, only with the opposite ideological purpose in view.

Despite the lip-service paid at times to Marxism and “evolution”, what Reed in fact gives us is a picture of female emancipation as a universal and timeless expression of “nature”, which is contradicted only by unnatural class-society in recent times. This explains why Reed can give no indication as to the way in which the family, forms of religious ritual etc. evolve out of the development of the forces of production—and why she can only give, if anything, an imaginary picture of just the opposite: the alleged effects of “women’s maternal functions”, of feminine “sentiments”, of “totemism” or of some other “natural” or “moral” factor in actually defying and overturning the economic bases of society. It is in this light that Reed sees the flesh-eating way of life of early hunting humanity curbed and eventually overturned by a *religion* (“totemism”), the religion therefore acting upon the economic basis of society and overturning it. The religion itself was in turn a product of women’s natural “maternal functions”. Marxists, of course, have traditionally reserved the term “idealism” to describe ideological systems and philosophical methods of this kind.

Reed’s view is that the first human social institutions were outgrowths of “the organs and functions of motherhood” (p.43). They were a direct product and extension of female nature, in which male nature had no part:

“The mothers alone were equipped with the maternal and affective responses that were extended into the human world in the form of social collaboration” (p.48).

Male nature was purely animal, until female nature- biologically “humanized” to start with—changed it. As Reed puts it: “the biological advantages for humanizing the species were on the side of the females, not the males” (p.44). Cannibalism was an expression of the violent sexual “nature” of males who had not been modified by female natural “functions”. For thousands of years, according to Reed, females lived in human society—an extension of “maternal functions” and “sentiments”—while males lived like animals (on account of their “violent sexuality”). Not only were these supposedly contrasting life-activities not based on any distinction between a human and an animal form of economy: they diametrically contradicted this distinction, the women continuing to live on plant-gathering (“like their ape forebears”), while the men did what no apes or monkeys can do—hunt big game through collective action and the use of artificial weapons.

In all Reed's work, there prevails this idea of various immutable "natures"—female nature on the one hand, male nature on the other—whose interactions determine the various forms which human society in the course of its evolution takes on. In this conception of fixed essential "natures" there is not even the glimmerings of a conception of the *dialectic*—of the way in which the evolutionary process moves through the gradual accumulation of tensions and contradictions which eventually result in a sudden explosion, in which things are changed into the opposite of what they were before. How can women's maternal "nature" explain "totemism" or the origin of society? If this "nature" has always existed, why did society only arise at the particular evolutionary "moment" when it did? Why does Reed feel the need to argue that it is a law of "nature" for the female sex to be emancipated—even devoting several pages to the extraordinary argument that the members of a baboon overlord's "harem" of females are (like all other female animals) really quite liberated? (pp.49–59). Why the need to argue for an essential *continuity* between animal and human maternal and family forms? Has Reed never considered the possibility that, as Engels (in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*) put it, "... the animal family and human society are incompatible things", that there was a complete *break* in the continuity of evolution, and that a central feature of the dialectical origins of human society was the *emancipation* of the female sex from precisely that male dominance which *is* so characteristic of the social life of monkeys and apes? Has she never thought of the possibility that human society was the product of a real *social revolution*, and that a precondition for this was the preceding intensification of male sexual dominance to a level incompatible with new socio-economic needs? In recent years a large number even of bourgeois anthropologists have begun describing human origins as "the human revolution". Is not this idea of more use to Marxists and the women's movement than the idea that early society was rooted in a "nature" which had always been there?

However "understandable" in terms of feminist sentiment, as an attempt at dialectical materialism Reed's book is a disaster. Marxism is not a particular "theory" (or string of "theories") which someone can dream up and then counterpose to all preceding achievements of scientific investigation and thought. It is nothing other than the sum total of the real findings of the various branches of science themselves—synthesized so that a picture of the whole process of nature and its emergence into culture emerges. It is true that Marxism is also a political weapon in the class struggle and in the struggle for women's emancipation. But this is true only in the sense that only the working class (and within this class, the oppressed sex) has a consistent objective need for scientific truth in all fields. Reed has provided the women's movement with one more attempt at a feminist mythology. But it is not myths which working class women need, but the truth.

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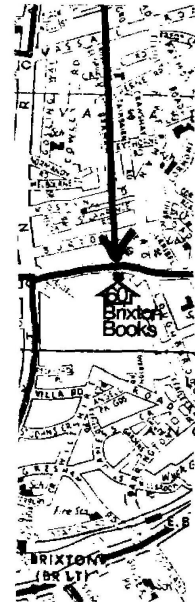
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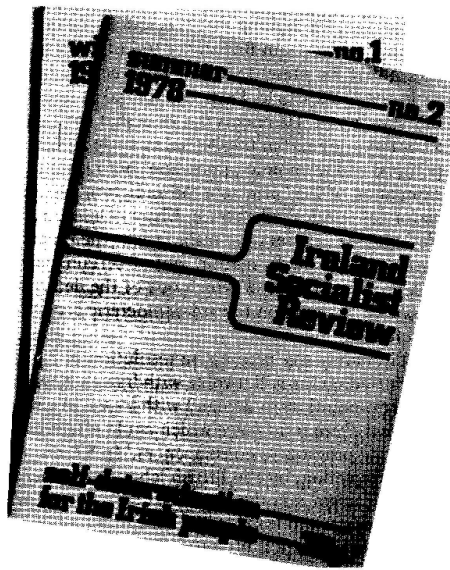
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Review: Socialist Register 1977 & Ireland

By Peter Chalk

Introduction

One aspect of the changes in British policy in Northern Ireland over the past few years has largely been unchallenged or ignored by the left in Britain. This is the increased ideological pressure from the Labour administration in support of the view that the six counties is a part of Britain and that the 'troubles' are a purely internal affair. Whereas the granting of political status, the attempted establishment of a 'Council of Ireland' and the negotiation of a truce with the Provisional IRA were part of a limited recognition of the desire of the Irish people for self-determination, the emphasis of the current direct rule team has been placed on eradicating this recognition.

Hence a great deal of importance has been attached to President Carter's statement last year which explicitly acknowledged the conflict as a purely British affair,¹ the hysterical reaction to the remarks made by Jack Lynch earlier this year about peaceful reunification and the lengths to which Mason is going to end political status.² Mason himself, soon after taking office, arrogantly stated that one of his aims was to 'gradually eliminate from the minds of young people the distortions of Irish history.'³ In short, the legitimacy of the ideal of a united Ireland is being called into question by the leaders of the British labour movement.

Similarly, on the left, there has taken place a polarisation between those who give unconditional support to the struggle of the Republican movement and those who argue that the national question is no longer of relevance or can be solved after the victory of socialism. It is fitting, therefore, that 'The Socialist Register 1977' included three important contributions⁴ to a debate that must necessarily take place among the British left.

The first article, by Antony Arblaster, is a brief, descriptive account of the past ten years that raises more problems than it answers. Chief among these is the Loyalist population in the North. Arblaster argues that it is insufficient to counter their claims for 'democracy' (majority rule) in the North by pointing out that they are a minority in the whole of Ireland. 'In both cases there is a foolish attempt to use an apparently democratic formula to gloss over a part of the history of Ireland.'⁵ His main point is that allowance has to be made for the 'fears and bigotry' of the *loyalists* but that one way of making

¹ Carter radically altered his posture from wearing an 'England out of Ireland' badge during the pre-election campaign to an explicit acceptance of British policy in the North; 'We have close ties of friendship with both parts of Ireland ... We support the establishment of a form of government in Northern Ireland which will command widespread acceptance throughout both parts of the community'. See *Hands Off Ireland* no. 3 for a full analysis.

² The inhuman and degrading treatment of hundreds of Irish Republican prisoners in Long Kesh and Armagh women's prison who are refusing to accept criminal status has been well documented elsewhere. See, for example, *Hibernia* (3/3/78) or *Intercontinental Press* (11/3/78).

³ This was during the course of what was described as a 'major and exclusive' interview given by Roy Mason to the world service of the BBC and broadcast on 19th January 1977. He also described British strategy as 'dealing with terrorists as criminals', building up the RUC as they 'became more respectable' and 'purposely standing aside from the whirlpool of political activity in Northern Ireland.'

⁴ *The Socialist Register 1977*, edited by R. Miliband and J. Saville, published by The Merlin Press, price £3. The three articles are 'Britain in Ireland, Ireland in Britain' by Antony Arblaster, 'Northern Ireland—an anti-imperialist struggle' by Michael Farrell and 'Some basic problems of the contemporary situation' by Peter Gibbon.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.68. All other quotes are from the articles unless stated otherwise.

them ‘come to their senses’ is the ‘meaningful threat of a British military withdrawal’. Nonetheless, any examination of the relevance of the national question and the nature of the Republican movement is absent.

Michael Farrell, on the other hand, begins from an analysis of the development of partition and relations between Unionist interests and those of the British Empire around the turn of the century. He attempts to show that the Northern Ireland state was established in the direct interests of British and Unionist capital ‘frustrating the wishes of the majority of the Irish people’, and as such has ‘no democratic validity whatsoever’. By arguing that it is still in the interests of Imperialism to retain British control of the six counties, he claims that the present struggle must be anti-imperialist.

In the third article, Peter Gibbon takes issue with precisely this standpoint. He rejects the view that the current conflict is a continuation of the ‘traditional struggle against British political and economic oppression’ but rather that it is an expression of the ‘principle contradiction’ between ‘two great historical political alliances in Ulster—Unionism and Nationalism’. He sees the main task as the breaking up of these two blocs and the formation, out of certain elements in them, of a progressive bloc of which one of the determining criteria would be ‘disposition toward democratic accommodation’. He concludes:

‘Ultimately any progressive resolution of Northern Ireland’s contradictions will involve withdrawal! Nevertheless, it seems pointless to demand withdrawal in circumstances *where there is no force* which could effect it in a manner having progressive consequences.’ (p.87, our emphasis).

The rejection, by the British labour movement, of Irish Republicanism is at the root of its despair over what to do about Ireland and leads to the acceptance of continued British control while there is no ‘progressive force’ to replace it—a force which it sees must be a reflection of its *own* democratic tradition. Gibbon, by reinforcing this outlook, and in particular by the way he does it (by utilising the views of Lenin on the national question), is thereby making a fundamental challenge to supporters of the national struggle. Consequently, this review will concentrate on his arguments in more detail.

Democracy and the national question

Gibbon attempts to refute the relevance of the national question by referring to the ‘Leninist’ model. Lenin, argues; Gibbon, saw national self-determination as a democratic demand laying the basis for ‘normal’ class struggle and supported national liberation struggles only when they were anti-imperialist. For the former, Gibbon maintains that ‘full political democracy was in fact established in southern Ireland in 1923’ and that ‘democracy of a sort was simultaneously established in the North’. Therefore in Lenin’s distinction ‘between countries where bourgeois-democratic reforms have long been completed and those where they have not’, Gibbon locates Ireland firmly in the first category.

While it is true that bourgeois democratic parliaments were established in both parts of Ireland by 1923 this was only after the crushing of the democratic authority of the 1919 Dail⁶ during the war of independence. In the North, massive pogroms and expulsions were unleashed against the Catholic community and the notorious ‘Black and Tans’ set loose on the South with a threat from Lloyd George of ‘immediate and terrible war’ if the partition Treaty was not signed. Both the Unionist and ‘Free State’ governments were actively supported by Britain following partition. And ever since, an intermittent series of internment, emergency powers legislation, no-jury courts, para-military state forces etc. has existed in both North and South.

Gibbon skips over these events but, for the North, they have had a tremendous effect on the progress of ‘democracy’. Farrell shows how the existence within the boundaries of a statelet of a large oppositionist minority could not allow the usual development of a modern capitalist nation:

⁶ The 1919 Dail was set up after the overwhelming Sinn Fein vote in the December 1918 general election when 73 of their candidates were elected along with 6 Nationalists out of 105 Irish seats.

The statelet established in the North in 1921 was viciously reactionary and highly sectarian ... the state could only survive as an armed camp and in a permanent state of emergency' (p.74).

Thus, when Gibbon argues that nationalist victory can only likely be won by '*restrictions* upon democracy' (p.83), it is certain that these restrictions could hardly be more stultifying than those in operation during and since the 1919–23 period!

More important, from the standpoint of the democratic content of the demand for self-determination, is whether it would increase 'the prospects of class struggle' in Ireland, or 'simplify class antagonisms'. As Gibbon points out, the 'principle contradiction' of the current situation in the North is that between Unionism and anti-Unionism. He argues that both are reactionary and that unity should be fought for on the basis of 'disposition toward democratic accommodation' and 'more universal criteria; positions on the general class struggle, women's rights and so on'. However, he does not dwell on the reasons why this unity has not yet been achieved or how, for the brief periods some unity has occurred it was followed by pogroms (1918 and the 1930s in Belfast, the late 1960s for example).

It is precisely on the question of national self-determination (anti-Unionism) that the Loyalist working class is tied to British imperialism. And it is precisely for this reason that no socialist current of any standing has developed among these workers since partition. Working class unity cannot be achieved in a vacuum—it can only be won through struggle within and against the concrete conditions in which workers live.

The practical consequences of 'accommodation' to Loyalism become clear in Arblaster's article. He argues that 'it is only under the meaningful threat of a British military withdrawal that the Loyalists will come to their senses, and be compelled to accept that the days of institutionalised Protestant hegemony and discrimination are over once and for all' (p.68). But elsewhere he argues that previous 'attempts to devise a new system of government for the province' by the Tory government in 1972 were 'timid and inadequate'. But would military withdrawal within continued political responsibility mean anything? Outside of a *complete and unconditional* withdrawal, a 'meaningful' threat would still allow the possibility of a return if 'law and order' breaks down again. This sort of compromise could only work if 'order' was re-established—ie. if the Republican struggle was defeated. It is apparent that 'accommodation' to the six county state must be conditional upon demanding that the Republican movement and its supporters renounce the national struggle.

The historic form of this struggle of the oppressed in Ireland—which Gibbon describes as having a 'definite social political and ideological basis' for which 'tacit support remains widespread'—is that of Republicanism or Republican socialism. It retains this support because the Irish bourgeoisie has left uncompleted the task of unifying the nation and ridding it of foreign oppressors. The struggle cannot 'democratically accommodate a state which was established in clear opposition to the wishes of the overwhelming majority of the Irish people in the elections of December 1918 and May 1921.

Similarly, in the South, this tradition ensures the domination of the political scene by the nationalist (or exnationalist) parties, with the Labour Party playing a subordinate role. The actual historical development since partition cannot be ignored, and it points conclusively to the fact that partition, Unionism, British control of the six counties, call it what you will, has grossly distorted the class struggle in Ireland. There can be no doubt that, in this sense, the failure to carry through the democratic task of complete political self-determination crippled the struggle of the Irish working class against its own bourgeoisie.

Imperialism and the national question

Gibbon's second argument is based on Lenin's conception of an anti-imperialist war of independence. While we do not accept that Lenin's views on the national question are definitive and are, at times, confusing,⁷ it is nonetheless important to look at this aspect of Gibbon's article.

He argues that:

... the shape of British political and economic domination over Ireland was completed well before the age of imperialism (which Lenin believed commenced in the 1890s), and there is little specifically *imperialist* about this domination', (p.84)

Gibbon then examines the reasons why Lenin regarded certain national struggles as anti-imperialist; not because of military confrontation but rather,

... because the contemporary conditions of existence of imperialist monopoly capitalism were in Lenin's view making its increasing oppression of small European states absolutely crucial to its survival... [Lenin] refrained from calling wars [for the creation of independent nations] antiimperialist except specifically in the period of the First World War, when the international conjuncture described prevailed.' (p.84)

As the '*conditions of existence* of monopoly capitalism's reproduction are [not] directly or indirectly touched upon', Gibbon maintains the struggle is not anti-imperialist. Rather,

'It is an "unseemly" situation within what is recognised by all as Britain's sphere of influence.' (p.85)

We can only make a brief comparison with Lenin's views here but it is enough to show that his theory was far more complex than that outlined by Gibbon. For instance, Lenin never saw imperialism as a specific relationship between countries existing for isolated periods in time. Rather, he defined imperialism as a definite stage of capitalist development, a world-embracing system of capitalist relations that included relations between countries. It was primarily due to the increasing efficiency of production in the advanced nations and the growing investment of surplus capital in undeveloped nations which greatly diminished the possibility of strong national capitalist classes being able to come to power in countries like Ireland.

Lenin described Ireland as a 'dependent and subject nation' with Britain as its 'imperialist patron'. He argued that 'two important distinguishing features of imperialism were already observed in Great Britain in the middle of the 19th century— vast colonial possessions and a monopolist position in the world market! Clearly, in the case of Ireland its changing position from agricultural to semi-industrial colony to combined colony and neo-colony after partition is precisely an example of the various forms of imperialist domination described by Lenin as 'transitional forms of state dependence.'⁸

⁷ This confusion is caused by the change in imperialist relations that took place during the early 20th century. Many bourgeois-democratic movements had compromised with imperialism and the struggle taken up by what Lenin described as 'national-revolutionary' movements. Also, unconditional support for bourgeois liberation struggles was tempered by considerations of Communist Parties started up in places like India for example. Nonetheless, when this distinction was made by a Communist International commission in 1920, it was decided to continue support for 'genuinely revolutionary' bourgeois liberation movements. (See *Lenin on the National and Colonial Questions*, p.32/33).

Despite this change in Lenin's views on the national question in colonial countries, an analysis was not developed of its relevance in relatively advanced countries like Ireland, where the peasantry is no longer the predominant oppressed class and the bourgeoisie, having totally compromised with imperialism, no longer has any aspirations to solving the national question. (For a detailed analysis of these points, see Phil Turner, 'Class and nationalism in Ireland' in *Ireland Socialist Review* no. 1).

Without analysing the changing nature of the national dynamic in the struggle against oppression, quotations 'plucked' from Lenin's pamphlets often appear to be confusing, if not contradictory.

⁸ Lenin, *Imperialism*, p.82.

Similarly, Gibbon's fetish about proving that Lenin only saw national wars as anti-imperialist during the First World War does not square with Lenin's position in 1920 of support for 'genuinely revolutionary' (ie. anti-imperialist) 'bourgeois liberation movements'.⁹ Lenin also wrote only that the war made the struggle against annexation 'particularly urgent' and that the question of self-determination in 'semi-colonies and colonies' was 'largely a thing of the future.'¹⁰

Lenin's position on anti-imperialist struggles was much more complicated than the way Gibbon portrays it. On the other hand, *it is clearly insufficient to try to analyse the importance of the national question in Ireland today in these terms.*

The national question today

Farrell avoids these pitfalls in his account of the developing relationship between Britain and Ireland. He explains how the weakness of the Irish bourgeoisie in relation to British imperialism proved to be a determining factor in its inability to carry through the unification of Ireland and this, coupled to a similar weakness and division in the Irish working class, enabled the British government and its Unionist allies to retain British domination, mediated through British control of the six counties. The division of Ireland 'weakened the economy in the new Irish (26 county) state and its potential for achieving economic independence'. This state has since been forced to encourage British and other multinational investment and Farrell argues that it is the protection of capital ('stability') in both North and South that makes the British military and political presence necessary. This is the actual relationship between Ireland and imperialism; and it is Britain's specific subordination of Ireland that plays a crucial role.

Gibbon ends up in his article by separating out the political and economic aspects of the domination of Ireland that are inextricably linked. He accepts imperialism's 'effects' in Ireland which 'include', 'eg. resource depletion by multinationals'; but extracts Britain's political role from these 'effects'—a political role he correctly describes as:

'Despite the IRA (?), *the fundamental issue in the conflict* from imperialism's point of view has all along been the manner in which Britain and its major allies (the Dublin government and "respectable" Unionism) should divide up local state functions' (p.85)

This is exactly what imperialist domination is all about and why, for the Irish people, the throwing off of the British yoke remains a central and unavoidable barrier to the struggle for socialism. It is the *British* state which defends capitalism in Ireland and the struggle of the Irish working class must necessarily come into conflict with that state's forces. *In this sense*, the Republican movement can be said to be leading the anti-imperialist struggle and it is in this sense that socialists in Britain should give them their unconditional support.

⁹ *Lenin*, On the National and Colonial Question, p.33.

¹⁰ *Lenin*, Nascent Trend of Imperialist Economism, p.30.

Letter: The IMG & Healyism

Letter from Sam Bornstein

Re: *Chartist International No. 1*

‘Reply to Alan Jones on Healyism’

Dear Comrades,

Congratulations on the publication of the first issue of *Chartist International*. I hope it will play a role in educating the ever-increasing number of young militants who are turning to what they consider to be Trotskyism.

There is one central point in Martin Cook’s otherwise excellent letter to Alan Jones of the IMG [International Marxist Group] that I want to deal with. It has some bearing on their refusal to publish the reply that your editorial refers to.

The IMG have always attacked the dishonesty, bureaucratic methods and thuggery of the WRP [Workers’ Revolutionary Party] and its predecessor, the SLL [Socialist Labour League]. They have argued, quite correctly, that these methods have nothing in common with Trotsky or Trotskyism. Now, whilst I am not equating the tactics of Healyism with the refusal of the IMG to publish Martin Cook’s criticisms of Alan Jones article, the non-reply of the IMG is not an isolated incident. On more than one occasion I have written to these guardians of orthodoxy challenging their snide comments on the early WIL [Workers’ International League] group and received the same negative reply. They seem to think that any interpretation of past events except their own, is an attack on their revolutionary purity, which must be resisted. There are a number of distortions, made over the years of the history of British Trotskyism, for which I have neither the space, the time or the inclination to deal with, yet a most cursory glance at the documents of the period will show the dishonest methods of these epigones of Trotskyism.

I do not think that you should give your readers the impression that there is much to choose between the two groups on questions concerning their past. An organisation that deliberately refuses to look at its own past, and misinforms its supporters, is incapable of building a revolutionary future. Both the IMG and the WRP are only prepared to discuss the early days of British Trotskyism on their own terms. Alan Jones follows the falsehoods of the Archers and the slanders of van Gelderen. I don’t think we should allow them to get away with it.

The IMG have always proclaimed their democratic principles, and the last sentence in Martin Cook’s letter

repeated in your editorial says “that the Red Weekly’s general distance from the methods of Healyism is one of its virtues”. You seem to have accepted the estimation of the International Marxist Group made by themselves. I doubt their revolutionary integrity and I question the assumption that their methods are so fundamentally different from Healy’s.

Martin Cook’s letter, as with all the other commentators on this issue, fails to point out that “Healyism” reflected the isolation of the British Trotskyist movement from the mainstream of working class politics and activities. Gerry Healy played little role, whilst the WIL and later the fused organisation, the RCP [Revolutionary Communist Party], were growing. Healy’s repeated attempts to create factions amounted to nothing during this period. It was only after 1945 when Trotsky’s basic assumptions and prognosis had to be questioned, and when the orthodoxy that grew up around Trotsky’s writings had to be adjusted to the new conditions, that were not and could not have been foreseen, and when the

proletarian cadres of the movement were still too weak to be effective, that Healy was able to form a stable faction under the guidance of the late Jim Cannon and with the assistance of Pierre Frank and the present leaders of the United Secretariat. Only with the decline of the RCP does Healy emerge as a leader.

This then is the nub of the question, why the IMG are incapable of being objective about the early days of British Trotskyism. It was their leader who created Gerry Healy, made him a leader, gave him a political platform and world stature. One cannot understand the rise of Gerry Healy, without an appreciation of the period and the particular role of Pierre Frank.

The Healys and Franks became leaders of consequence during an ebb in revolutionary activity. The new period, one of working class upswing will in turn produce the Lenins and Trotskys of tomorrow and confine the Healys and Franks where they belong. I hope that the *Chartist International* will continue to be of service in these gigantic social developments.

Fraternally,
Sam Bornstein

Editorial Comment

Comrade Bornstein's letter and good wishes are more than welcome and require little comment. However there are one or two points which do need to be made.

Firstly, despite their reluctance to have a free and open discussion on the past of the movement the general record of the IMG in relation to questions of Labour movement democracy, whatever its limitations, shows them to be unquestionably head and shoulders above the Healyite organisations of past and present and the *Chartist International* would defend comrade Martin Cook's judgement that

“The Red Weekly's general distance from the methods of Healyism is one of its virtues.”

Clearly, we do not think this leaves no *room* for improvement on their behalf, nor criticism on ours and we will continue to bring to light those cases where their deeds and words do not correspond,

Secondly, linked with our first point, comrade Bornstein writes, “You seem to have accepted the estimation of the International Marxist Group made by themselves”. Now, whilst in general we clearly do not accept the IMG's selfevaluation — if we did we would join them — we do consider it necessary at the opening of a debate — even an abortive one as this turned out to be — to *assume* good faith on *both* sides. If this proves, subsequently, not to be the case at least, something will have been learnt from the debate.

Finally, comrade Bornstein mentions “the falsehoods of the Archers and the slanders of Van Gelderen”. Whilst we are sure the comrade has good reason for these harsh words, without further evidence than that presented in his letter, however, this may seem a highly personalised and critical way of taking up erroneous views which will not aid the enlightenment of our readership.

In general, however, given these provisos, we would welcome comrade Bornstein's contribution to this debate and look forward to hearing more from him and others in the future.

Geoff Bender, for Chartist International Editorial Collective

Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory

In June supporters of the *Chartist*, *Workers Action*, and a number of other individual Labour Party members met to discuss the likely eventuality of a General Election being called towards the end of the year. The aim was the formation of a united campaign to achieve a massive Labour vote in the election, *but* fought for on the basis of socialist policies. That is on the basis of policies decided by Labour Party

conference where they are in the interests of working class and oppressed people, and conflicting policies where, for example, the Labour Party nationally has an incorrect position e.g. over wage controls.

The *Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory* could really engender new enthusiasm in the ranks of the Labour Party, draw in many disillusioned Labour supporters and build a much stronger socialist unity within the Party itself.

All Labour supporters in broad agreement with the aims and platform of the Campaign are invited to sponsor and work for it. Please write to the Campaign c/o 182 Upper St, London N1 or Chartist, 60 Loughborough Rd, London SW9 for copies of the Appeal Statement (1p each; 100-75p).

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