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Russia and the return of class struggle

Bill Bowring

President Putin celebrated his 62nd birthday on Tuesday 7 October. Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, congratulated him and gave him special thanks for his "care for the spiritual condition of the people". Kirill continued: "Now we are living through a complex time, when attempts are being made to put pressure on Russia. I am convinced that in these conditions it is especially important to preserve belief in those traditional spiritual and

cultural ideals which have formed our Fatherland and its great history and culture.”[\[1\]](#)

Kirill was praising Putin’s “conservative turn”, more and more evident since he was re-elected for a third term in 2012. This includes not only a reversal of the limited progressive reforms introduced by President Medvedev, but a new crack-down on independent media in Russia with journalists threatened, harassed, physically attacked and even murdered with impunity; an attack on non-governmental organizations, which are now systematically smeared, fined and forced to close down for independent and critical work spuriously presented as “political activities” in the interests of foreign sponsors, under the 2012 Foreign Agents law[\[2\]](#); a denial of freedom of assembly, in which protesters no longer have the right to express their views in public spaces, and are arrested and tried in unfair proceedings; and a renewed social conservatism including harassment of the LGBTI community by means of a homophobic law and attacks on their freedom of expression.

And Putin's birthday is also the 8th anniversary of the murder of the fearless Russian investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya[\[3\]](#). The police investigation into her killing has been marred by many shortcomings and has, to this date, failed to establish who ordered it.

But it is important not to lose sight of two continuing underlying features of the present Russian regime.

First, there is what has been aptly described as the system of personalised state-sponsored capitalism that now exercises a strangle-hold on Russian government and economy. The current regime has been described as a "kleptocracy": the title of Karen Dawisha's new book is "Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia"[\[4\]](#). This system has been thrown into sharp focus as a result of the recent US and EU sanctions imposed on Russia[\[5\]](#). In April 2014, shortly after the illegal annexation of Crimea, a regulatory body in Moscow, the Market Council, voted to transfer the account for Russia's wholesale electricity market, worth at least \$100 million a year, to Bank

Rossiya. This one of a series of decisions in recent years designed to bolster the assets of this bank.

A recent article in the New York Times International[\[6\]](#) describes how Bank Rossiya, built and run by some of Putin's closest friends and colleagues from his early days, in St. Petersburg, is at the centre of the way his brand of crony capitalism has turned loyalists into billionaires whose influence over strategic sectors of the economy has in turn helped him maintain the regime's grip on power.

Despite privatisation policies and programmes since 1991, the Russian state still owns two-thirds of market capitalization in the Russian stock market. The state's ownership is concentrated in four strategic sectors: energy (oil, gas, and electricity), banks, defence industries, and transport. There is little state ownership in most other sectors in the Russian economy, including consumer goods, non-defence manufacturing, agriculture, insurance, and services.[\[7\]](#) But it is precisely in the two thirds of the economy that remains in state hands or has

been seized by the state (as in the expropriation of Yukos and arrest and imprisonment of its owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky) that Mr Putin and his cronies are in control and have become incredibly rich. Their policy with regard to these strategic sectors, which are also a fountain of ready cash, is to maintain their control and to protect their wealth. This is why Mr Khodorkovsky, who is a free market neo-liberal and Russian nationalist, is seen by the regime as such a threat, especially since his release and return to politics.[\[8\]](#)

Bank Rossiya was created in 1990 at the initiative of the Leningrad branch of the Communist Party, with party funds as capital. It was also believed to handle the banking needs of the KGB. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, it was almost bankrupt. With Putin's help, it became the recipient of a number of lucrative St Petersburg accounts and recovered.

In 1996, Putin joined seven businessmen, most of them Bank Rossiya shareholders, in forming a cooperative of summer homes, or dachas, called Ozero, "lake," in the northeast of St. Petersburg.

The cooperative included the homes of Mr. Putin, Mr. Yakunin, Mr. Kovalchuk, Mr. Fursenko and his brother Sergei.

Yuri Kovalchuk[\[9\]](#), one of Putin's earliest collaborators, is now the Chairman of the Board and largest shareholder in the Bank, and worth, according to Forbes, \$1.4 billion. Gennadiy Timchenko[\[10\]](#), also very close to Putin, and founder of the oil-trading giant Gunvor, is said by Forbes to be worth \$14.5 billion including his holding in the Bank. The US placed him on the sanctions list, alleging that Putin "has investments in Gunvor and may have access to Gunvor funds." Andrei Fursenko[\[11\]](#), now an adviser to Putin, worked with him in the St. Petersburg mayor's office in the 1990s. He and his brother Sergei were among the early investors in Bank Rossiya. Vladimir Yakunin[\[12\]](#) is the Chairman of Russian Railways, the country's largest employer. He was also an early investor in Bank Rossiya, as well as a member of the Ozero dacha cooperative.

The person said to be the real power behind Putin, Igor Sechin, who is now President of the state oil

company Rosneft (now in bed with BP), has Rosneft shares worth roughly \$169 million.[\[13\]](#) He was close to Putin since their days in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, and was Putin's deputy prime minister from 2008 to 2012. Finally there is Matthias Warnig[\[14\]](#), who serves on boards of corporations that dominate Russia's energy, aluminium and banking sectors, including Bank Rossiya. He was a member of the Stasi in the former GDR, when Putin was served there in the KGB for five years to 1989. They both insist that they both met for the first time in St Petersburg.

Second, and closely linked to the first, Russia is a state in which the secret service has taken power. Even in the USSR the KGB was kept under close control by the Communist Party. The FSB, the KGB's successor, is today much larger, at least 200,000 strong, much better funded, and in a significant move some years ago Putin changed the colour of their uniform from green to black. This is what Andrei Soldatov has described as the "new nobility"[\[15\]](#).

Putin was a career KGB officer for 16 years from

1975 until 1991, although he only achieved the rank of *podpolkovnik* (Major); and from 25 July 1998 until August 1999, President Yeltsin appointed him to the post of Director of the FSB (one of the successor agencies to the KGB). Putin's closest associates, the *siloviki*, share his KGB background.

First, there is Igor Sechin, probably the most formidable member of the Kremlin team, referred to above. Second, Viktor Ivanov has been Putin's deputy head of the presidential staff since January 2000, and since 2008 also heads the state anti-drug agency, the Federal Service for the Control of Narcotics. Ivanov was elected to the Board of Directors of Aeroflot in October 2004, and was running Almaz-Antei, an air defence consortium, at the time. Ivanov became an advisor to the president in March 2004. Third, Nikolai Patrushev, also from St Petersburg, joined the KGB in 1975, the same year as Putin.[\[16\]](#) When Putin directed the Main Control Department in 1997, Patrushev became his assistant. Once Putin became prime minister in 1999, he appointed Patrushev as director of the FSB. In 2008, Patrushev lost his

position as FSB director but became a member of the Security Council. Fourth, there is Vladimir Yakunin, mentioned above.

Rashid Nurgaliev, an FSB general and a friend of Patrushev's, was appointed Minister of Internal Affairs in 2003. Viktor Cherkesov, a close friend of Putin and a former KGB operative, was appointed to lead a new anti-narcotics agency when Putin became President. At the same time Putin appointed Sergei Ivanov, who served the foreign intelligence branch of the KGB, to the post of deputy prime minister. Vladimir Shulits, a former deputy director of the FSB, became part of the leadership of the Russian Academy of Science. The telecommunications company Alfa Group was headed by Anatoly Protsenko, former deputy director of the Federal Protective Service, part of the FSB. The former head of the FSB's Economic Security Department, Yuri Zaostrovtssev, was appointed vice-president of Vneshekonombank, which is used by the government to manage Russian state debts and pension funds.

Thus, Russia might give the appearance of a

decisive and authoritarian regime directed by an impregnably cohesive team of secret service veterans and crony capitalists. It should be no surprise that the ideology of this group, all of them devoted to the restoration of Russia as a Great Power, entitled to respect from the rest of the world, especially the West, is strongly influenced by the writings of the "Nazi crown jurist", Carl Schmitt. The key chapter of a book published in 2006, entitled "Sovereignty" (a mantra of the regime) with contributions from Putin, Medvedev, and the regime's ideologist Vladislav Surkov[\[17\]](#), is entitled "Sovereignty as a Political Choice", with many references to Schmitt, written by the scholar who has translated more of Schmitt into Russian than exists in English. This is the ideology of decisionism, of the "state of exception", vehemently rejecting liberalism, and insisting on authoritarian rule, even dictatorship.

The weak link in this apparently strong chain is Putin himself. Unlike his predecessor he is never drunk in public, and feels the need to promote a hyper-masculine image, often appearing half-naked. But it is likely that he would never have

risen beyond the rank of Major in the KGB had he not been chosen by the late Boris Berezovsky[18], then the treasurer and “grey cardinal” of the Yeltsin regime, as the best operative for the job of protecting the Yeltsin family, and providing a reliable succession, including, as a first action as Acting President in 2000, signing decrees granting immunity to Yeltsin and his family.

In fact, Putin is not a strong or decisive leader in times of crisis, as demonstrated by his paralysis and inability to act decisively following the sinking of the Kursk submarine on 12 August 2000[19], the “Nord-Ost” theatre siege in Moscow in October 2002[20], and the Beslan school hostage disaster of September 2004. The case of the Beslan Mothers, complaining of the deaths of their children as the result of government incompetence followed by a total failure to investigate what happened, is being heard on 14 October 2014 by the European Court of Human Rights.[21] It is widely rumoured that the annexation of Crimea earlier this year was not the result of a planned strategy, but a knee-jerk reaction: pure opportunism. Putin was nowhere to

be seen in the first few days of the crisis, only emerging to give a thoroughly incoherent press conference.

Putin and his circle have in fact been suffering from "Orange Paranoia" ever since the events in Kiev from November 2004 to January 2005. They are terrified that suddenly they will lose power, and at the same time face prosecution and the loss of all the assets they have accumulated.

There are two threats in particular which they fear every day.

First, there is the Pandora's Box which the annexation of Crimea has opened. The real victims of Russia's incorporation of Crimea and Sevastopol into the Russian Federation on 21 March 2014 are the Crimean Tatars, whose homeland this is [\[22\]](#). The Crimean Tatars, conquered by the Russian Empire in the 18th century, suffered genocide and deportation to Central Asia in 1944 at the hands of Stalin. They now number several hundred thousand, some 15% of the population, are well organised, and boycotted the fake "referendum"

of 30 March 2014. A member of the Russian President's Human Rights Council has estimated that only 15-30% of Crimea's population voted.[\[23\]](#) The Crimean Tatars are now subject to persecution, and their leaders have been forbidden entry to Crimea. The annexation is already proving extremely expensive, and the Crimean Tatars are not going to leave.

The regime is very conscious of the fact that there were already 5 ½ million Tatars in the Russian Federation, the most numerous minority, with their own ethnic republic. Tatarstan, on the River Volga, in which Tatar is the second official state language, is one of the richest and most autonomous of the 83 subjects of the Russian Federation. Tatars ruled Russia for 300 years, and Moscow has a Muslim population of 2 million; Russia has more than 16 million Muslims, more than 14% of the population.

By claiming that the "population of Crimea" had a "right to self-determination", the regime has encouraged not only the Tatars but many of Russia's more than 150 ethnic and linguistic

minorities to claim their own rights much more forcefully. There are renewed separatist claims in Siberia and the Russian Far East, and repression of local leaders has begun. The USSR broke up in 1991. The dreadful fear of the regime is that the Russian Federation too could disintegrate.

Second, Putin and his cronies fear the Russian working class. The regime was already terrified by the mass protests in Moscow and other cities in 2011-12, and the left-wing activists arrested after the protests of 6 May 2012 against Putin's inauguration were subjected to show trials. On 14 February 2014 eight accused were convicted. On 24 February seven Bolotnaya case accused received prison sentences [\[24\]](#): Sergey Krivov – four years; Andrey Barabanov – three years and seven months; Stepan Zimin, Denis Lutskevich and Alexey Polikhovich – three years and six months; Artem Savelov – two years and seven months; Yaroslav Belousov – two years and six months; and Alexandra Dukhanina received a suspended sentence. Mobile phone videos taken by other demonstrators showed that there was no case against the accused.

But the participants in these impressive mass protests were overwhelming educated middle class Muscovites, in well-paid employment, who were expressing their disgust at the *rokirovka*, the cynical stage-managed swapping of roles by Medvedev and Putin.

After the tremendous strike by Russian miners in 1991 it appeared that the Russian working class was entirely dormant. The successor to the Soviet trade unions, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions (FNPR)[\[25\]](#) survived the collapse of the USSR with most of its enormous property – offices, sanatoria, facilities – intact, and has continued its predecessor's role of supervision of housing and welfare in close cooperation with management. Its leader, Mikhail Shmakov[\[26\]](#), after flirtation in the 1990s with the idea of creation of a social democratic party on the basis of the unions, has been a loyal supporter of the regime. FNPR has about 22 million members, mostly in former Soviet enterprises, about one third of the working population. Occasionally FNPR finds itself obliged to lead workers' struggles.

The new factor in working class struggle in Russia has been the construction of new factories by foreign investors, notably in the car industry: Ford, Renault, Peugeot-Citroen, Volkswagen, General Motors. New, fast growing, "fighting" trade unions have appeared in these enterprises as well as in transport, teaching and public services, and now organise some three million workers, in a variety of new organisations, notably the KTR, Confederation of Workers of Russia[\[27\]](#). On 2 October 2014 an article in the leading business daily newspaper *Kommersant*, "How labour fights capital in Russia"[\[28\]](#), described the effective fighting units which are now organising campaigns against employers with the same thoroughness as Proctor & Gamble plans its actions for selling washing powder.

Moreover, research[\[29\]](#) by the Centre for Social and Labour Rights[\[30\]](#), based in Moscow, shows that in 2013 there were 277 protest actions, in iron and steel, automobiles, food, and public service. 40% of these took the most radical forms: strikes, hunger strikes, blockading of roads and railway lines. Official Russian statistics only record "legal" strikes, which Russian labour legislation

make practically impossible. In the first six months of 2014 alone, there were 130 worker protests, and for 2014 as a whole it is expected that there will be up to 275 protests.

And there are more and more “spontaneous” worker actions, many concerning non-payment of wages. The English word “spontaneous” usually translates the Russian word *stikhiiniy*, which, as Lars Lih points out in his splendid 2006 “Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done in Context”[\[31\]](#), has the connotation in Russia of volcanic eruptions or the violent underground movement of tectonic plates. The first three synonyms in the Russian thesaurus for the noun *stikhiinost* include *anarkhichnost* (anarchicness), *anarkhiya* (anarchy) and *bezotchyotnost* (unaccountability). In a country which has experienced massive unexpected eruptions of popular fury – the Pugachov uprising in the 18th century, and the 1905 and 1917 revolutions – this new phenomenon is deeply disturbing to the regime.

Putin and his colleagues surely sense the ground trembling beneath them in Russia, quite apart from the continuing bloodshed in Ukraine. The

new workers' movement can only add to their paranoia and panic.

[1] <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/vatican-publishes-book-by-patriarch-kirill>

[2] <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/russia-year-putin-s-foreign-agents-law-choking-freedom-2013-11-20>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/media/anna-politkovskaya>

[4] <http://books.simonandschuster.com/Putins-Kleptocracy/Karen-Dawisha/9781476795195>

[5] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/20092c52-af91-11e3-a006-00144feab7de.html#axzz3GcxV7Qdo>

[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/28/world/europe/pays-to-be-putins-friend-.html_r=0

[7] <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-role-state-corporations-the-russian-economy>

[8] <http://www.khodorkovsky.com/>

[9] <http://www.forbes.com/profile/yuri-kovalchuk/>

[10] <http://www.forbes.com/profile/gennady>

timchenko/

[11]

http://russiaprofile.org/bg_people/resources_who

[12]

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/railway-boss-Vladimir-Yakunin-is-trying-to-keep-his-company-country-and-President-on-track.html>

[13] <http://www.forbes.com/profile/igor-sechin/>

[14]

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/13/putin-german-right-hand-man-matthias-warnig>

[15]

<http://www.agentura.co.uk/english/projects/thene>

[16]

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[17]

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putins-top-aide-vladislav-surkov-mocks-us-sanctions-the-only-thing-that-interests-me-about-the-us-is-tupac-and-i-dont-need-a-visa-for-that-9200170.html>

[18]

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/27/t-berezovsky-inquest-open-verdict-death>

- [19] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/894638.s>
- [20] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-20067384>
- [21] <http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/29629/>
- [22] <http://khpg.org/en/index.phpid=1404610996>
- [23] <http://www.businessinsider.com/did-vladimir-putins-human-rights-council-just-publish-2014-5>
- [24] http://rbth.co.uk/politics/2014/02/24/anti-putin_protesters_in_bolotnaya_case_sentenced_3
- [25] <http://www.fnpr.ru/n/55/>
- [26] <http://persona.rin.ru/eng/view/f/0/17284/mikhail-v-shmakov>
- [27] <http://ktr.su/en/>
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- [29] <http://trudprava.ru/expert/analytics/protestanalyt>
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- [31] <http://www.haymarketbooks.org/pb/Lenin-Rediscovered>



Rojava, imperialism and the Islamic states

Chris Strafford

There was a time, just over a decade ago, when the leaders of the United States and Britain promised the world a quick victory in Iraq in order to put an end to an unhinged dictator, halt the Islamist threat and, crucially, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Afterwards there was even a big party on the USS Abraham Lincoln with President George W Bush arriving in a fighter jet to proclaim that the mission was over, the world was safer and a vicious dictator had been removed.

Luckily for the Iraqis a nice interim administration was on hand to see the transition to democracy and prosperity with a new national army trained, equipped and partially funded by the US and its allies. But better still, all that oil that was just lying around could now fuel a huge rebuilding programme that Western and Gulf companies were on hand to help out with. Perfect situation for Iraq, dictator gone, Islamist threat suppressed, democracy and a return to the international community as a friend of the undisputed superpower.

In those heady days around 1 May 2003, apparently nobody in the US administration foresaw that the US-led invasion might develop into a situation where the country was fractured along sectarian lines, with hundreds of thousands of refugees, one and a half million dead and endless violence. Now we have seen the collapse of the Iraqi Army, the sudden rout of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) forces and the start of a bombing campaign by the US Air Force to hold back the forces of the Islamic State whilst they retrain and rebuild Iraqi forces. Since US air strikes began

on Islamic State fighters Kurdish forces have retaken some of the positions it lost in the initial onslaught but those successes have forced the Islamic State to adjust their posture, move their heavier artillery to built up areas or to Syria, move out of indefensible positions and focus on consolidating control over Anbar province. Now the US and its allies are vowing greater involvement from regional and world powers to put an end to the Islamic State or at the very least contain it.

In 683 C.E. the victorious army of caliph Yazid ibn Muawiyah's sacked and looted the holy city of Medina and damaged the Ka'ba during the siege of Mecca, yet this did not mark the consolidation of the Umayyad caliphate but accelerated its decline and eventual collapse in 750 C.E. Today the US and its allies are finding their power slipping away in the Middle East. The crimes committed in Iraq by the US-led invasions and occupation left no basis for a democratic society and through the massacres in places like Fallujah across the Iraqi Sunni heartlands ensured that a political space would open for those Islamists who could

demonstrate an ability to inflict losses on the US and Iranian backed central government. In Iraq this became the Islamic State or ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham).

Why is the aftermath of Yazid's victory in 683 C.E. relevant to what is happening in Iraq today? The lesson is not an obvious critique of the Caliphate, its imagined history held by the medievalists of the Islamic State or even the Daily Mailesque "they've always been killing each other" argument but that even in victory the greatest military power in the 7th century – like the greatest military power today – is seeing its dominance slip from between its fingers because of the crimes committed, political miscalculations and the rise of new political and military powers. The USA won in Iraq, in Afghanistan and in Libya but saw its political influence wane in the entire region.

The decline in power for the United States has gone hand in hand with failed military interventions, regime changes from above and its general policy in the Middle East can only be described as desperate and chaotic. So desperate

is it, in fact, that it relies on the Islamic Republic of Iran, Shia death squads, Kurdish nationalists and socialists to save the Iraqi state it created. Even that may not be enough, as the Islamic State seeks to strangle the Iraqi capital after inflicting defeat after defeat on the Iraqi army.

The two threads that run through the wars in Syria and Iraq are, firstly, the decline of US power as its failure in Iraq and the wider region (Middle East/ North Africa) underlines. Here the long-term meddling by the imperialist states that split the Arab world has given political Islam space to flourish whether in state power like in Saudi Arabia or as an ongoing attempt for actual state power that the Islamic State wants. Secondly, the collapse of the Arab Spring whose democratic aspirations were either snubbed out by tyrants or Islamists of one variety or another has for a moment closed an opening to democratic change in many Arab countries. In all of this the working class is politically nowhere in the region, politically absent or stuck on the sidelines or fodder for the forces of reaction of many different stripes.

In civil wars where the working class is politically absent it is inevitable that those on the left will make mistakes if they are not cautious. At the beginning of the uprising against the Assad dictatorship in Syria it was clear that any democrat and socialist with a brain should back the protests but as the civil war took shape and Islamist militias overtook the secular civilian and military organs of the uprisings it has become harder to understand and assess the situation. Some have opted to support the Assad dictatorship as a supposed anti-imperialist bulwark (that just happens to be backed by imperialist Russia) whilst others have backed the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian opposition in exile who have received sporadic support from the Western powers with a variety of Islamist forces backed by the Gulf states and Turkey. Likewise, the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's brutal state began with protests inspired by the movement in Tunisia but was soon transformed by the Gulf powers and NATO leaving Libya a fractured society with a civil war dominated by Islamists and the remnants of the military who defected during the NATO bombing campaign to the rebels. The hopes of the protests, and the

Arab Spring generally, were left in tatters and seemingly another dead end.

Despite all of this and in the darkness of the brutal civil war in Syria a bright light of hope, reason and solidarity has emerged in northern Syria. Kobani. Rojava. Two words that no mainstream commentator knew, nor who the people were that used them or why they would become so important. For those of us on the internationalist left who have watched from afar the struggles of the Kurdish cantons in northern Syria (Western Kurdistan) against the Islamists, the Assad regime, the Turkish state and also sections of the FSA, the drawing of attention to Kobani in the world's media and the consciousness of billions is definitely welcome. Yet as this process happens and as the media sketch a romanticised struggle of Kurdish fighters against the forces of the Islamic State something is at risk of being lost in transmission. What is being lost is that in the cantons of Rojava a great experiment is taking place to build a society based on individual rights, social solidarity and democracy.

We see the pictures of Kurdish women taking an active part in the fighting against the Islamic State but the struggle for equality by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and its Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its People's and Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) goes much deeper. Apart from the long history of women having a leading role in politics and war across the Kurdish nation there is an attempt to make political equality as much as a reality as is possible. The political, civic and military bodies of the Kurdish cantons of Rojava enforce a strict quota to ensure the representation of women at all levels of society. Further, the society they are trying to build recognises all religious faiths and ethnicities and ensures political and civil rights are accorded to all equally. A stark contrast to the gangsters around Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, who want "Kurdistan for the Kurds". It is here that the nuance gets lost in the mainstream media where we have a left-wing Kurdish movement that struggles for national rights but is opposed to Kurdish nationalism and nationalism generally.

So who should we support in the nightmare that is choking the Levant and Mesopotamia? In Syria we must support those activists around the Local Coordination Committees and other democratic and secular organisations as well as workers' and women's organisations who are opposed to Assad and political Islam. It is only through the mass mobilisation of the working class, farmers and the dispossessed masses that real change can come about, which is why we should support YPG/YPJ forces. They are fighting for a society based on social solidarity, democracy and the mass participation of the population in all areas of public life; a society that is the most democratic and open in the region; that stands out against the dictators, warlords and religious fanatics that are slaughtering hundreds of thousands. In this darkness the forces of the YPG/YPJ stand as a bright light and everything must be done to ensure their voices are heard, their stories are told and that they receive all the support they need.

We should have no trust in the United States and its international coalition to confront the Islamic

State, Assad or support genuine democratic change. As we have seen in Libya and Afghanistan, regime change from above has been a nightmare for supposedly liberated populations. In Syria today the US and its allies are playing a cynical game with Kobani. They know that the longer the siege continues the more resources the Islamic State will expend in Syria and not in crushing the encircled Iraqi army and Shia death squads in Anbar province in Iraq. Turkey's Erdogan is keeping his tanks quiet for now but, like the Red Army on the Vistula in 1944, is ready to pounce once the slaughter has cleared away political opponents.

This is not to say that the Kurdish militias fighting the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamists are wrong to welcome and ask for more air strikes by the US-led, anti-Islamic State coalition. No military force would reject US help when facing massacres. However, what we should recognise is that military aid only comes from imperialist powers when it is advantageous to them and that means despite at times having immediate objectives that coincide we should reject the idea that those who had a big role in

creating the chaos in the region can solve the political and social problems through air strikes.

What is needed is arms, not the rusted Peshmerga weapons the USA has been dropping to the YPG/YPJ, and accidentally to Islamist fighters, in Kobani but sophisticated modern weaponry that can put the Kurdish militias on an equal footing with the Islamic State who sport US-made weapons looted from the shambolic Iraqi army. For those of us in the West, we can do more than just look on, write messages of solidarity. We must continue to build the demonstrations that have taken place in dozens of cities for Rojava, spread awareness of the social upheaval taking place in Rojava and organise and campaign for humanitarian aid to reach those displaced by the fighting in Syria and Iraq.

Further, as an internationalist left we must not sow illusions in the role of the USA and its regional allies and be clear that against the Islamists, the warlords and the dictators only a movement from below of the workers and the dispossessed can bring about real democratic change in the region.



Haunted by Andrei Zhdanov

Don Milligan

A month ago Western Australian Opera opted to withdraw performances of *Carmen* at the Opera House in Sydney because they feared that the setting of Georges Bizet's opera in a cigarette factory might clash with the opera company's sponsorship by an Australian public health agency committed to the reduction of smoking. This action was roundly condemned by state premiers, by the prime minister, and by leading figures in Australia's cultural life. They all argued that such

ensorship of the arts was both absurd and reprehensible. One of the leaders of Australia's tough anti-smoking campaign, Professor Mike Daube, made the case for artistic freedom succinctly by saying: "We don't stop the theatre from running *Macbeth* because it promotes killing kings."

Indeed.

When Mick Jagger sings *Stray Cat Blues*, we all know that the song alludes to heterosexual sex and possibly group sex with under age girls.

I can see that you're fifteen years old
No I don't want your ID
I can see that you're so far from home
But it's no hanging matter
It's no capital crime

In some versions of the song the girl is 13 and not 15, although even at 15 such behavior would in most jurisdictions be criminal. The song's eroticism is powerful and certainly louche in its disregard for the law. It faces us with similar

concerns to those raised by Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, published in 1955. In that novel the capacity of the child to sexually manipulate the adult is explored with considerable subtlety and artistic depth.

Murder, rape, lust, psychosis, desire untrammelled by ethical or moral considerations, are all explored by artists when they evoke real human experiences and invite us to travel virtually through the fictions they create. It is intrinsically difficult to be a human being, saddled with limitless desire, confined by vital social constraints, heir to numerous physical and social limitations, and threatened with certain annihilation by time itself. This is perhaps why artistic creation is of such high value by enabling us perpetually to explore and experience the meaning, possibilities, and boundaries of our intellectual, sensual, and emotional lives.

Different artistic forms grab at us in different ways through music, sound, photography, painting, sculpture, ceramics and drama, whether on stages or screens. All of these forms are pregnant with

works, which are troubling to public moralists and authorities alike. Yet we cannot live without the capacity that the arts have to express the inexpressible, to present and represent our own doleful, exuberant, exciting, and troubled thoughts and experiences, to us in ways that help us to think more widely or deeply about our predicament. Art is, quite simply, necessary in the interrogation and contemplation of our interior lives and the lives we live with others.

It is perhaps because of the role that art has in roaming through the fields of our singular and autonomous consciousness that artistic production always presents the authorities with unfathomable meanings and unpredictable consequences. It is from these that the desire for censorship arises in many different kinds of state and in many different kinds of society.

Whether it is D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, or Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, the issue always is the manner in which the artwork in question challenges indubitable truths (whatever they are), which the authorities (regardless of who

they are), wish to defend in the face of radical doubt and shifting experiences.

At times authority itself is in dispute, as in 1914 when Diego Velázquez's, *The toilet of Venus*, was slashed with a meat cleaver by the suffragette Mary Richardson. This was both a political stunt designed to draw attention to the arrest and imprisonment of Emmeline Pankhurst, and also to attack the venerable tradition of the female nude in the European artistic canon, and protest the role of the male gaze in the objectification of women. Mary Richardson's motives were as far as I'm concerned impeccable, her causes admirable, but surely not ones that negate the beauty or erotic charge of the 'Rokeby Venus'.

Contradictions of this sort emerged recently at the Vaults in Waterloo when demonstrators compelled the closure of a live art installation sponsored by London's Barbican Centre, Exhibit B, which explored nineteenth and early twentieth century human zoos and ethnographic displays that showed black Africans as objects of scientific curiosity. The intention of the white South African

artist, Brett Bailey, and of the black actors and artists who hoped to participate in the installation, was to explore the way in which European eugenic reveries and racial hierarchies were intrinsic to the ambitions and brutal dehumanizing realities of Europe's colonial empires in Africa.

The protestors who closed down the gallery and compelled the cancellation of Brett Bailey's installation claimed that the artwork in question was illegitimate because it was conceived and presented by a white artist, and because it depicted the objectification of black people as the passive victims of white power structures. In short the artwork was charged with perpetuating the very processes of racial dehumanization it purported to attack, all for the edification of a metropolitan elite of prosperous white culture vultures. So, charges of race and class privilege were arraigned against the Barbican and the artist in a populist campaign against the art establishment.

The whiteness of the artist was held to be

important because he could not have experienced the oppression of black people, although, of course, the relation of white people to the oppression and dehumanization of black people was indeed at the heart of the exhibition, which Brett Bailey as a white South African would know something about. Similarly, the successful pacification of subject peoples and races in Africa inflicted by the terror and brutality of colonial administrations also lay at the heart of the exhibition and of Brett Bailey's artistic intention.

The protestors could not challenge the truth or veracity of the artwork, but only its origin, its class content, its formal qualities, and its failure to depict black people as active agents of their own heroic emancipation. Now, there have been many examples of where black people have not been pacified by their oppressors and have indeed participated in their own emancipation, but this has in truth not been a universal or abiding aspect of the colonial experience in Africa – artistic integrity regarding the experience of black Africans of both the Victorian and Edwardian eras – would not permit overwhelming or exclusive

focus upon resistance. Of course, there was resistance, but it was resolutely crushed by military means and by the implementation of racial hierarchies and the processes in which black people were dehumanized in exactly the manner depicted in Brett Bailey's installation.

The protestors denounced the work as "racism disguised as art" because it did not gel with their own agenda of promoting black activism against racism in the here and now. It was a work conceived by a white man that dwelt upon the presentation of black people in the colonial era as the passive victims of white men and racist ideologies.

In this regard the outlook and attitude of the protestors is reminiscent of the work of Andrei Zhdanov who thought that the proper role of art, indeed as the only role of art, was the promotion of the interests of the Soviet and international working class. For Zhdanov the origin of the artist and the political and social content of the artwork were inseparable from the struggle for socialist construction. Art was to serve exclusively the

tasks of the political struggle of the oppressed. In his speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 Zhdanov noted that Joseph Stalin had called Soviet writers "engineers of the human soul" and went on to spell out the strictly political criteria by which literary works were to be judged. All art was to depict the present from the standpoint of the future reality, which was in the process of being created.

In a similar vein many on the contemporary left wish to judge artworks by whether or not they have the 'correct' political orientation, and whether they are produced by people with the 'appropriate' experience, or with an 'acceptable' political outlook or intention. So it is thought by many that only black people, or women, or homosexuals, or workers, are uniquely equipped to produce artworks that deal with the specific social experiences of the communities or groups from which they come. Similarly, many argue that artworks should focus upon the role which people with particular racial, gender, or cultural identities have in the development of their own self-emancipation.

The fact that such prejudices defy the entire development of art within bourgeois society is regarded as a badge of honour by our latterday Zhdanovs. The bitter truth is that direct experience of oppression or discrimination confers no particular capacity or insight that is not available to gifted artists regardless of their position within the class or racial hierarchies of capitalist society. What is more, whether the experiences that artists present us with are deeply shocking, potentially reactionary, or simply banal, has no bearing whatever on their origin, on their political outlook, or on their capacity to make us think differently about what may have been familiar or unquestioned.

Art is the area in which the unexaminable can be examined, where the inexpressible can be expressed, where the unsayable can be said. It is necessary for the health and wellbeing of public discourse and private reflection. Consequently, our opposition to the censorship of artworks whether by state agencies or radical protestors should be absolute.



Review: Pride

Dave Lewis

Review of the film "Pride" (Pathe Films, UK, Cert 15) by Dave Lewis (former member of London Lesbians & Gays Support the Miners 1984/85). Image copyright Colin Clews, www.gayinthe80s.com

Pride tells one of the many thousands of overlooked stories from the 1984/85 Miners strike – that of the close links built between the London based Lesbians & Gays Support the Miners group

(LGSM) and the mining community of Dulais, South Wales. The script was over 3 years in the making and most of the characters and events are based on the people and events of the time. This review contains spoilers for those yet to see the film, so be warned.

LGSM was born when a few friends, volunteers at Lesbian & Gay Switchboard, decided to organise a bucket collection in support of the mining communities at the 1984 Pride March, some 3 months into the strike. This collection raised a couple of hundred pounds and those responsible then hatched a plan to do more – with the aim of bringing left politics into the London gay community and to hopefully raise awareness of the discrimination faced by lesbians & gays within the trade union movement. LGSM's first meeting of 11 people spiralled to a total membership of 60+ by the end of the strike and over £25,000 was raised for the Dulais Valley mining communities. And the links forged between these two essentially disparate groups remain in place to this day. But we found during the course of the 84-85 dispute that our two communities were less

disparate than we might have thought at the outset.

Pride covers the first visit LGSM made to Dulais to deliver the money raised. It accurately portrays the culture clash between the visiting metropolitan gay men and lesbians (there were 27 of us on that first trip) and a predominantly Welsh-speaking tight-knit mining community. For dramatic effect, the film depicts a rather cold and hostile reception from some of the miners' families. In fact, the reception we received was quite the opposite. We were welcomed with open arms into the homes of those we were visiting. If there were any people with reservations about our visit, they were kept well away from us during the trip.

At a time when the Thatcher Government was trying to starve the miners back to work by denying their families access to child benefit and the miners themselves access to NUM funds (NUM bank accounts and property were all frozen and seized), LGSM helped to keep food on the table and heat in the homes of the community of

Dulais. And at a time when Thatcher & the popular press branded the miners and their families "the enemy within", these families began questioning whether the press image of gay men & women being predatory child-molesters & perverts was equally inaccurate. "If they can lie about us and demonise us, why should we believe what they say about anything", ran the thought process in many mining communities.

When the strike came to an end in March 1985, out of defeat came many victories. The South Wales mining communities travelled down to London in summer 1985 and their marching band led that year's Pride March alongside LGSM and many other trade union contingents. "You have worn our badge and now we will wear yours", as one of the characters in the film says, became a reality. The NUM went on to support motions advancing lesbian & gay equality at the 1985 Trades Union Congress & Labour Party Conference, announcing this intention in advance and securing the support of other trade unions by their actions.

It is debateable whether the tide was already

turning in Labour & trade union circles on support for lesbian & gay equality measures, but NUM support was a significant victory and the existence of LGSM played a part in the campaign for greater equality. Pride is bringing the history of this struggle to a younger audience, accustomed to today's more liberal mainstream views. What is indisputable is that the greater level of lesbian & gay equality we all enjoy today was not the product of corporate sponsorship by the major multinationals & the lesbian & gay business community – those attending what has now become the Pride Festival in Soho, could be forgiven for thinking this was the case. In the early 1980's, some gay bars even refused to allow publicity for Lesbian & Gay Pride marches to be displayed or distributed on their premises. You can imagine how these same bars reacted to collections for the miners at their venues. Fortunately, this level of antagonism was far from universal & LGSM made a point of holding collections at the venues that were less than sympathetic to our cause.

I started this review by saying that this was one of

thousands of overlooked stories from the strike. Whilst I am eternally grateful to Stephen Beresford, the writer & Matthew Warchus, the director, for their efforts in memorialising this story in such a masterly way, I am equally grateful to Mike Jackson, the LGSM secretary (depicted in the film), for keeping the flame alight for 30 years. And I hope that the inspiring stories of the men and women of the mining communities, whose lives were changed forever by the strike, will also be told at some stage. Pride provides a taster for this story and the film "Still The Enemy Within", now on release, takes this story one step further.

If I have one criticism of the film, it is the way that the women in LGSM who split off to form Lesbians Against Pit Closures (LAPC) are depicted. Whilst I didn't agree with their decision at the time and still don't, the film does not treat their views with respect and gets dangerously near to ridicule. I feel this is unfair and unwarranted, given the rise of feminist ideology in the 70's & 80's. This development merely reflects what was happening within large sections of the political left at the time.

Pride is hilariously funny, inspiring and incredibly touching, in equal measure. It introduces trade unionism and the issue of lesbian & gay equality to a mass audience that may identify with neither issue very closely, without hitting them over the head. The cast is fantastic and the soundtrack pure 80's, with a little bit of 70's, for those of a certain age. Several of the central characters are now no longer with us and didn't get to see their story told. Mark Ashton, one of the founding members of LGSM (played by Ben Schnetzer) died in 1987 aged 26 and Hefina (played by Imelda Staunton) & Cliff (played by Bill Nighy) died more recently. Pride ensures that their legacy of solidarity lives on.

To this end, LGSM intend marking the 30th anniversary of the miners leading the 1985 Pride March by co-ordinating a presence at the Pride Festival in 2015, with former South Wales miners, their families and friends and a trade union contingent. Please join us to mark the 30th anniversary of this historic event.



A Room Without A View – Being A Hostel Worker Abroad

Adam Henshall

I work at a hostel in Spain. I work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, and for my services I receive, unlike Forster, a room without a view.

I ended up out here, not to take a summer travelling, or to kill time before starting a *real* job, but to attempt to start my life afresh in a new, exciting, and thoroughly beautiful world. My moving to Spain wasn't a conscious effort to

discover some serene inner knowledge through mixing with *locals* and living a lifestyle akin to a Tibetan monk who enjoys the odd night out, but I suppose it could be viewed as such. And I doubt you'd be too far from the mark.

My place of work is small. The hostel holds around 40 guests, charges very little in comparison to its immediate competition, and has a fairly decent rating on the main aggregator websites. My primary responsibility is for the night shift, though, within an informal work setting such as this one, I could find myself manning reception for a hour or two in an afternoon, or doing a bit of cleaning here and there, also. I perform your typical receptionist duties; checking-in customers, giving directions, dealing with whatever problems may arise, working the informal bar, and having general responsibility over the place. As I received no financial remuneration, I negotiated a cut of what beer or soft drinks we happened to sell. This, being a small stop-over style hostel, means my earnings amount to roughly 10 to 15 euros a week.

As a result, I live on the wrong side of the poverty line, and struggle to afford food never mind spending on leisure or planning for coming weeks or months. These problems can be fixed over time, maybe through private English tuition, or other private pursuits. However, they become more difficult when you only have a small window of time where you're free to explore these other options. Going to bed at 8am doesn't leave you available during the day to help someone improve their English, but instead gives you only the afternoon to try to squeeze people in before work begins again.

Add to this that you can only find clients who wish to meet publicly or that live locally, as you're priced out of public transport. It certainly isn't impossible, and the longer I'm here the more alternatives I'm attempting and making time for, but the crucial point is that the degree of exploitation of hostel staff is such that it gravely impacts on the workers' ability to broaden their earning potential.

Being a hostel worker isn't, of course, all doom and

gloom. It's generally a relaxed industry where labour is non-intensive, and tasks are rarely monotonous and repetitive. Making god-knows-how-many beds each morning, or washing up a shared kitchen worth of dirty dishes isn't some artisanal task on the route to self-realisation, but it could be worse. The constant flow of largely eager happy travellers dying to see, learn, and explore, generally provides for a buoyant and characterful environment. Transience becomes your friend as faces come and go, stories flow one after another as a stream replenishes, and days of clear blue skies mask the passage of time. It has an idyllic quality which acts like a siren; trapping its prey with smiles and tapas.

Though, a perpetual holiday it isn't. It begins like a holiday, but becomes one from which you can never leave, as you progressively run out of money, unable to visit that restaurant, go out to that bar, visit beautiful monuments, or spend any time to oneself. To an outsider you are in this perpetual party – a holiday which never ends – but the reality differs. That ache in your stomach as you root through food left behind by guests in the search

for something edible isn't a symptom of the idyll this industry can appear to be. The dread as you wave away hordes of partygoers into the night, knowing that on their return they'll be rude, possibly aggressive, provide you with ample cleaning work, and put an end to any and all possible sleep you hoped you'd squeeze in before readying breakfast in the morning, isn't an example of stress free living. The realisation that you haven't left your place of work in an entire week, and even if you do find chance to venture out it is only for a walk, as you have no money in your pockets with which to do anything anyway, further emphasises the limits of this penniless mode of living.

But there is the sun. The warm touch of the sunlight as you pause between tasks on the rooftop, or as you inhale cheap tobacco on the patio, works wonders to pick up ones day, and to impart smiles on those around you. Despite whatever gripe eats away at you, a quick glance up at a blue sky framed by terracotta tiles possesses some magical healing quality – one which is so much harder to attain at home in the British Isles.

Britain's ubiquitous Seasonal Affective Disorder hangs over the land; grey skies and grey buildings reflect grey emotions. The hostel life does, in that sense, keep some quality of a 'party'. It has the vibrancy, the colour, and the temperance – or lack of – of a party. The ups and downs are, much like in high tempo work in Britain, fully pronounced.

The dynamics of the workplace, and the interactions of employees, remain consistent with the strange yet energetic geist of the place. No one is contracted, and no one is even Spanish. With an immigrant labour force it is easier to impose worse conditions, hours and pay due to lower expectations. Migrant labourers don't have the embedded roots of indigenous labourers: they don't know the legality or illegality of employers' behaviour; they can't simply leave and move in with parents, friends, or another relative; they don't have the language skills to attain further gainful employment; and they don't have the capital to support themselves outside of the hostel whilst waiting for future opportunities. Of the five staff we have, we represent four continents, five native languages, and three religions. Communication is,

as expected, difficult. However, the issue of communication isn't simply pertinent towards our daily duties and fulfilling the various tasks expected of us; a lack of internal communication appears to me to be the linchpin of our fragmentation as a work force and our acceptance of so little in exchange for so much.

When a step back is taken, and the situation of myself and my colleagues is viewed from the outside, it all begins to look very worrying. Here are a number of penniless workers from across the globe, aged between 24 and 32, who work long hours for the profit of their bosses for no real pay in return. I quite enjoy my job, but that shouldn't come into it; I am being exploited for my labour. One then must ask, how many others are being exploited in a similar manner? Many of us are already aware that over the summer lots of hostels are staffed via Labour Tourism, but it isn't university students looking for a free holiday who staff these hostels the rest of the year. Across Europe a significant number of hostels will be running these same business tactics, and like mine, will be employing migrants from across the

world who are both naive and desperate enough to provide their slave labour for an opportunity to station themselves in a new nation. This is not only exploitative of the migrant labourers, but also damaging to the already struggling local economies around Europe where youth unemployment figures are so staggeringly high.

I will continue to work here as the weeks and months go by, and continue to attempt to forge out a better living in Spain, but coming here and being exposed to the internal workings of the tourism industry in a modern first-world European country has horrified me at the level of exploitation seemingly taken as normal. These aren't isolated incidents. These aren't unusual. These employment practices are commonplace across the tourist industry.



Legend of the Dead Soldier

Bertolt Brecht

And when the war reached its final spring
With no hint of a pause for breath
The soldier did the logical thing
And died a hero's death.

The war however was far from over,
And the Kaiser thought it a crime
That his soldier should be dead and gone
Before the proper time.

The summer spread over the makeshift graves
And the soldier lay ignored.
Until one night there came an official army
medical board.

The board went out to the cemetery
With consecrated spade
And dug up what was left of him
For next day's sick parade.

Their doctor inspected what they'd found
Or as much as he thought would serve
And gave his report: 'He's medically sound
He's merely lost his nerve.'

Straightway they took the soldier off.
The night was soft and warm.
If you hadn't a helmet you could see
The stars you saw at home.

They filled him up with a fiery schnapps
To spark his sluggish heart
And shoved two nurses into his arms
And a half-naked tart.

He's stinking so strongly of decay
That a priest limps on before
Swinging a censer on his way
That he may stink no more.

In front the band with oompah-pah
Intones a rousing march.
The soldier does like the manual says
And flicks his legs from his arse.

Their arms about him, keeping pace
Two kind first-aid men go
Or else he might fall in the shit on his face
And that would never do.

They daubed his shroud with the black-white-red
Of the old imperial flag
Whose garish colours obscured the mud
On that blood-bespattered rag.
Up front a gent in a morning suit
And stuffed-out shirt marched too:
A German determined to do his duty as Germans
always do.

So see them now as, oompah-pah,

Along the roads they go
And the soldier goes whirling along with them
Like a flake in the driving snow.

The dogs cry out and the horses prance
The rats squeal on the land:
They're damned if they're going to belong to
France
It's more than flesh can stand.

And when they pass through a village all
The women are moved to tears.
The trees bow low, the moon shines full
And the whole lot gives three cheers.

With oompah-pah and cheerio
And tart and dog and priest
And right in the middle the soldier himself
Like some poor drunken beast.

And when they pass through a village perhaps
It happens he disappears
For such a crowd's come to join the chaps
With oompah and three cheers.

In all that dancing, yelling crowd
He disappeared from view.
You could only see him from overhead
Which only stars can do.

The stars won't always be up there
The dawn is turning red.
But the soldier goes off to a hero's death
Just like the manual said.

Translation: John Willett

In: "Bertolt Brecht. Bad Time For Poetry", edited and introduced by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1995), 5-8.



Review: Anselm Kiefer at the Royal Academy

Diana Blatton

A visit to the Anselm Kiefer retrospective exhibition at the RA can be a daunting prospect for many reasons, the scale of the work, the complexity of themes and the sheer overwhelming volume of diverse media on display in this huge exhibition.

Kiefer has many interests among which German history, mythology, alchemy, poetry, ritual,

metaphysics, cosmology, are explored and transformed into a special, unique vision of our world.

Kiefer was born in Germany on 8 March 1945 just before the end of the Second World War, so growing up in post-war Germany has been a major conditioning factor in his development and a defining influence in his practice.

As a young artist he found that there was a reluctance to acknowledge and confront the recent Nazi past and the damaging distortion that had been inflicted on German culture.

Reacting to this he made provocative photographs and paintings of himself wearing his father's coat (he had been a Nazi party member) giving an illegal salute.

But in these images, the pose looks weak and limp and pathetic. In one painting there are references to Classical sculptures, favoured by the Third Reich, hovering in ghostly form in the sky above the saluting figure seen standing beside the

Rhine. This painting, despite the unsettling subject matter is full of beautiful passages showing Kiefer's command and expressive use of oil paint.

He is also a skillful and fluent watercolour painter exploiting the potential of the medium to great effect as seen in *Winter Landscape* 1970, where the delicacy of the paint starkly contrasts with the violence of the image. Any idea about watercolour being a soft medium used for pleasing subjects, easy on the eye and brain, will be rapidly dispelled here. It is this quality of employing seduction with repulsion that forms a consistent element flowing like the Rhine through the show.

A major characteristic of Kiefer's work is the use of elemental materials that includes ash, clay, straw, wood, blood, lead, sunflowers, copper and recently, gold and diamonds.

The physical manipulation of materials has given him opportunities to explore his themes and concerns resulting in awe-inspiring work, gigantic in scale and ambition.

As his practice has developed over the years, the surface of the 2D work becomes increasingly 3D to the point where it seems as if a vertical canvas cannot support the weight of the material.

Because many of the materials employed are by nature fragile, paint and other additives trowelled on in heavy impasto, the monumentality of the work increases a sense of its precariousness and possible disintegration.

Kiefer apparently, is not worried by this possibility!

One of the preoccupations that recurs in the paintings is the forest. Being aware of recent history, these paintings can have different readings dependent on whether they are viewed as places of refuge or murder.

Kiefer's understanding of the way in which paint behaves is seen here, dripping, contrasting thin with thick textures, implying spatial depth and volume. There is always an underlying sense of perspective in the composition of the visual elements giving, however obscured, structure to

the painting.

The use of single point perspective is especially strong in the converging parallels employed in the huge paintings of the bombastic Nazi Neo-Classical architecture, destroyed in the war, but reimagined by Kiefer as charred ruins.

Railway lines and tracks in the landscape take us nervously towards an ominous vanishing point.

With his high status in the art world justifiably recognized he now has the power and means to do anything he dreams of, demonstrated by the increased use of very expensive materials and huge installations. I was left with the feeling that because he "can do" he "will do".

Is there the possible risk that the priceless value of the materials will overwhelm us and act as a barrier in our ability to reach further into the meaning of the work?

The exhibition continues until 14 December.

Image:

Anselm Kiefer

Operation Sea Lion (Unternehmen Seelowe),
1975

Oil on canvas, 220 x 300 cm

Collection of Irma and Norman Braman Miami
Beach, Florida

Photo Collection of Irma and Norman
Braman, Miami Beach, Florida / © Anselm
Kiefer



Review: Critical Theory and the critique of Political Economy

Liam Conway

Critiquing the Critiques – Werner Bonefeld's new book analyses the relationship between Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy with a particular focus on the 'New Reading' of Marx, that arose in Germany in the aftermath of 1968[\[1\]](#)

Introduction

For those unfamiliar with Werner Bonefeld's[2] work over the last three decades this book will be very useful. It lays out all the constituent elements of it in a compact but nonetheless rigorous fashion. His distinctive perspective on issues ranging from critical theory to anti-Semitism, and the social constitution of society via a unity-in-separation of subject and object, as well as what it means to be anti-capitalist.

The book is structured into four sections and three chapters within these sections. There is also an introductory chapter. There are introductions and conclusions to the sections, which give clarity to many of the ideas discussed, and the aims of what is being analysed. Despite the numerous topics and relative short length of the book, it flows well with no sections feeling out of place. Each chapter feeds into the next and there is no feeling of disjuncture. As noted, the book deals with numerous topics. My intention is to provide the reader with an overview and description of some of these.

Why critical theory? What is critical about critical

theory? These are just two of the central questions this book aims to understand. It develops and reaffirms the importance of critical theory as the only true critical theory of society. Drawing his distinction between critical and traditional theories of society Bonefeld develops arguments in relation to political economy, arguing that many Marxist thinkers have failed to fully embrace a critical conception of capitalist society. This leads to what the author believes to be problematic and non-critical understandings of political economy.

Critiquing Economics

Against the grain of the classical Marxist tradition, I argue that the critique of political economy amounts to a critique of ontological conceptions of economic categories, including the category of labour as a trans-historically conceived activity that defines the human metabolism with nature in abstraction from society. The origin of this critique goes back to the early Frankfurt School challenge to the orthodox Marxist tradition, and it was later taken up by the so-called new reading of Marx that developed in

Germany in the aftermath of the 1968 student movement.[\[3\]](#)

Bonefeld engages in a critique of both classical political economy and more traditional Marxian economics. His argument rests on the notion that any critique of political economy must engage in a sustained critique of economic theory as some form of natural law. Economic objectivity lies not with any trans-historical laws of development but rather with the social constitution of society. As he argues

'the categories of capitalist political economy are the categories of definite social relations and are thus immanent to the actual relations of life'[\[4\]](#).

The argument here reflects the strong anti-teleological aspect of critical theory. The basis of classical political economy lies in the prescribed idea of general laws of economic development that assume a pattern that inevitably leads to the present. Thus a conception of society as naturalised. Economic theory does not question how things actually come to be, it simply takes

them as they are. Thus the age-old argument of every Young Conservative I've ever met, that to criticise capitalist relations is to somehow critique human nature.

Critical theory accords primacy to the social relations that govern in and through society, not above it. The idea is that *'however objective in its nature, economic nature is in its entirety a socially constituted nature'*[\[5\]](#). The critique of political economy must therefore negate any notion of *'economic categories as naturally appearing things'* and dissolve their *natural* appearance as nothing more than a socially necessary illusion that forms the ideology of present society. To critique society means to not only critique its appearance but to understand the basis of how this appearance takes form. If one accepts the existence of economic categories as *natural* then the critique will reflect this acceptance. How then can political economy be truly negated if the basis of its existence is accepted?

Class

The critique of the traditional schools of Marxism developed by critical theory and the New Reading based itself around challenging many preconceived understandings in Marxism. In doing so, it made no bones about noting the ambivalences in Marx's work or its disagreement with revered figures such as Engels. If critical theory was to be truly critical then it must be within its own tradition as well as towards capitalism. It therefore opened up the reinterpretation of the prescribed understandings of ideas like dialectics, historical materialism, value and abstract labour that had dominated the Second and Third internationals along with the later Moscow-approved Official Communist philosophy. Bonefeld develops many of the arguments made by critical theory and the New Reading but provides his own nuanced understanding of ideas within the critique of political economy. He develops critiques of leading figures associated with the New Reading such as Hans Georg Backhaus[\[6\]](#), Helmut Reichelt[\[7\]](#) and Moishe Poistone[\[8\]](#).

The New Reading removed many of the dogmatic concerns of Marxism yet for Bonefeld it focused

too much on the value-form, it thus failed to fully appreciate the conditions that allow exchange relations to take place[9]. The argument here rests on the notion that in order for capitalist social relations to take place, certain circumstances must be in place to allow this to happen. One must be in a position to sell his or her labour while the other must be in a position to buy his or her labour time with an eye to making profit. Exchange existed before capitalism yet the form it takes in the present relies upon the pre-condition of those two classes finding themselves in that position to enter into an exchange. As he notes:

'The circumstance that the capitalist exchange relations comprise an exchange between unequal values in the form of value equivalence requires explanation. The exchange relations cannot be fully established without a critical theory of abstract labour, class and class antagonism. The attempt to do so substitutes the critique of the actual social relations for a logical development of the value form as some secularised thing that is valid in itself, as if value posits more value just like that, without

certificate of birth'[\[10\]](#)

This specific insight is what to my mind marks out this book in terms of its criticism of the New Reading and its focus on the value-form. It does not deny the importance of the value-form but rejects the central focus put upon it by those associated with the New Reading. Engaging this particular point is somewhat difficult for non-German speakers such as me, as I am reliably informed that a majority of the material is untranslated into English. What can be asserted is this focus on class antagonism makes up the core backdrop of this work; all the major points developed in this book emerge from this insight, 'class antagonism is the critical concept of a capitalist society'[\[11\]](#).

Primitive Accumulation

Regarding primitive accumulation, the book presents a highly original insight against the traditional conceptions of the idea. Primitive accumulation is understood as the distinct period of transition from pre-capitalism to

capitalism[12], Bonefeld argues against this pre-written ideal of capitalist development seeing it as highly deterministic. This reiterates the critique of teleology discussed earlier, 'the past does not contain the future as its unfolding destiny. Rather, the present contains the past, and it is the present that reveals the significance of the past as the historical foundation of the existing social relations'[13].

The development of this argument is premised again on critiques of exiting Marxist accounts and the primacy of class. Primitive accumulation can only be primitive from the standpoint of capitalist accumulation. Its necessity exists not in the past but in the present where it is described as a period necessary for later developments as if it was predetermined. In order for capitalist accumulation to explain its existence, it evokes an historical objectivity that divorces the human basis of such developments as if they existed beyond our action. This once again negates the primacy of class antagonism as the foundation and central conception of capitalist society.

Anti-Capitalism

The final section deals with anti-capitalism. The chapter speaks more broadly to the 'Left' and the proponents of modern anti-capitalism. This by no means involves a dumbing down, but rather the ideas discussed should be familiar to anyone with experience in Socialist or anti-capitalist politics. The chapter contains a critique of anti-capitalism that presents a strong criticism of the personification of capital. This criticism deflects from critiquing capitalism as a system but rather places responsibility on the heads of individuals or groups of people. Marx's insight that his critique was not *'to make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them'*^[14] remains as valid then as it is now. Bonefeld draws upon this to note how many modern anti-capitalists are drawn into bizarre justifications in the name of opposing capital. These range from providing support to organisations such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in the name of opposing imperialism, and on the domestic front laying the

blame of current crisis on groups of people such as bankers and the elites.

At its core the personification of capital leads not to a critique of capitalism but rather excuses its excesses on the basis of bad management, "If things had been done correctly then we wouldn't be in this mess" is hardly the most piercing of criticisms but it seems to have dominated most debates since the recent crisis erupted. The specific causations of the crisis remain important but as Bonefeld rightly asserts capitalism is a system based upon crises, its very foundation rests upon this. The understanding of the current crisis as caused by the overzealous nature of certain groups in society fails to grasp this fundamental point. That does not mean to say sit back and just allow crises to unfold as inevitable. To truly resist crises one must resist capitalism as the form of society that allows crises to cause such misery and destitution.

The personification of capitalism represents a frustration at capitalism that leads to badly rationalised arguments about the state of things.

At its worst, this can lead to the demonization of specific ethnic and religious groups of people, most notably anti-Semitism. The closing section of the final chapter engages in an argument regarding the characterisation of the Jews as the powerful other that controlled money capital. The perceived conflict between finance capital and labour provides an interesting read. The basic point of this chapter reiterates Adorno and Horkheimer's argument from *Dialectics of Enlightenment* [\[15\]](#) regarding the character of anti-Semitism during the Nazi period. The argument has seemingly lost none of its potency and is well presented and argued by Bonefeld.

Communism

It could easily be assumed, as is often the case with critical theory, that an account such as this, with its focus on negation and critique, leads to a blind alley in terms of proposing forms of struggle in the present. I reject this point completely; the promise of a new tomorrow must be premised on a complete critique of society in its present form. To my mind there can be no argument against this

point. This work seems to reiterate that in a well-developed theoretical manner; the analysis and critique are incredibly persuasive and potent. There are no punches pulled in his engagement with the supporters of capitalism and its opponents from within Marxism, I feel there will be many debates to be had regarding its content. The premise of a new tomorrow for Bonefeld lies with the realisation of negation in the struggle against existing society; the promise of tomorrow lies with the rejection of society, as it exists. This means a complete negation. To say no as an individual is a difficult thing but to say it as a class in unity could bring the curtain down on capitalism. The reality of communism exists with this negation.

Overall, this book was a very rewarding read. It brings together a large array of ideas and provides devastating critiques of both capitalism and some of its Marxist critics. The book will no doubt appeal to those most associated with left communist ideas. That said, in a period where criticisms of capitalism have taken on no more than a dismal rejection of it as an unfair system

ran by elites and corporations, I feel it is a must read for any person who considers themselves Marxist or anti-capitalist. Werner Bonefeld restates the fundamentals of the critique of political economy and provides us with a highly engaging and important piece of work.

[1] See Ingo Elbe's *Between Marx, Marxism and Marxisms – Ways of Reading Marx's Theory* <http://viewpointmag.com/2013/10/21/between-marx-marxism-and-marxisms-ways-of-reading-marxs-theory/> for a useful account of the New Reading and how it differs from traditional approaches

[2] See libcom for a good selection of his work <https://libcom.org/tags/werner-bonefeld> and <https://libcom.org/tags/open-marxism>

[3] Bonefeld, W. 2014 p.3

[4] Ibid p.41

[5] Bonefeld p.2

[6] See Open Marxism volume 1 Backhaus, H.
'Between Philosophy and Science: Marxian Social

Economy as Critical Theory'. Link here

<https://libcom.org/library/open-marxism-volume-1-dialectics-history>

[7] See Open Marxism volume 3 Reichelt, H. 'Why did marx conceal his dialectical method?' Link here
<https://libcom.org/library/open-marxism-volume-3-emancipating-marx>

[8] See Postone, M. 'Time, Labour and Social Domination (Cambridge, CUP) 1996.

[9] Bonefeld p.42

[10] Ibid p.42

[11] Ibid p.22

[12] Ibid p,80

[13] Ibid p.80

[14] See Karl Marx, Theories of Surplus Value, vol 3 (London, 1972) p.252

[15] Adorno, T and Horkheimer, M. Dialectic of Enlightenment (London, Verso) 1972.

Critical Theory and the critique of Political Economy – On Subversion and Negative Reason – Werner Bonefeld (2014) Bloomsbury, London.



The Scottish Referendum: Nationalism and Political Disintegration

Matthew Jones

The Scottish independence referendum produced the expected majority for NO, by a margin of 10% – 55% to 45% for YES. However, some of the patterns of the vote were surprising to many.

Areas that have been the core of support for the Scottish National Party (SNP) such as Aberdeenshire, Perth and Kinross and even Banff and Buchan, where Alex Salmond has represented

a seat for most of his career, voted No – in some cases by more than 60%. Clearly in its core areas, which are largely rural, the SNP did not even carry its own voters. Polls reported that across Scotland around 20% of those who voted for the SNP in the 2011 Holyrood election voted No.

In contrast, the victories for the Yes vote were in the traditional bastions of the working class: Dundee (57.4% Yes), West Dunbartonshire (54%) – centred around the old shipbuilding and engineering town of Clydebank (54.0%), Glasgow (53.5%) and North Lanarkshire – with the former coal, steel and engineering towns of Motherwell, Airdrie and Coatbridge – (51.1%).

The first question arising from this is why did the SNP fail to gain support in its traditional areas while traditional working class areas – the base for the Labour Party, the Communist Party of Britain and numerous organisations arising from Trotskyist groups – including the Scottish Socialist Party – were the base for the vote for independence and Scottish nationalism?

In answer to this first issue it is clear both from our own experience in workplaces and the polling done during and after the referendum that the working class was split. Three sections tended to support a Yes vote. That section which had already convinced itself of Scottish nationalism – many of whom are in and around the SNP – was the smallest of the three. The second section was the organised left and those around them and, more widely, those workers who view themselves as on the left. In some workplaces, particularly in the public sector in the main cities, makes up an influential group. Under the influence of the majority of the organised left groups this layer of workers has been moving towards Scottish nationalism and went over to complete and enthusiastic support during the referendum campaign. The third and largest section of the working class to give majority support to a Yes vote was the insecure, marginalised and/or unemployed who have seen their living standards – and their faith in most forms of politics – steadily ground down or near destroyed since the destruction of much of large scale industry in the 1980s and 1990s. It was the votes of this final

group that were decisive in delivering the four major council areas for a Yes vote.

The Yes vote in working-class areas was essentially an alliance between those who had decided for their own political reasons to support a Scottish nationalist project. A large section of the working class sees itself as having little or nothing to lose and voted Yes to put up two fingers to the Government and the system combined with a hope for a halt to the oppression of austerity.

There was another section of society in Scotland which publicly backed a Yes vote, probably to a greater degree than any other – artists and cultural workers. This group is heavily dependent on Scottish government funding and patronage and alongside the activity for the Yes campaign there was an intense and vitriolic campaign within the community against those artists brave enough to publicly support the No side which will have silenced many others.

Polls make it clear that more men than women voted Yes while in age terms the largest Yes vote

was by the 25-39 age group at over 55% while the older the voters the more likely they were to vote No. the youngest age group those 24 and below were also more likely to vote No, however, there do not appear to be an adequate sample of 16-17 years to determine how this group voted.

The SNP made it absolutely clear that if the Yes campaign had succeeded then the economic policies of austerity and support for imperialist wars would have been continued uninterrupted. SNP leader and Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond made clear in his speeches and visits to the US during the campaign that his servility towards the US Government was at least the equal of Cameron's or Miliband's. The SNP Scottish government's White Paper on Independence ('Scotland's Future'), its manifesto for a Yes vote, is clearly based on austerity economics.

While the White Paper waffles on about growth and better prospects for workers in an independent Scotland two things expose these promises as window dressing and lies. The first is its commitment to maintain UK Sterling as the

currency of an independent Scotland in a currency union with the remainder of the UK. This would mean that an "independent" Scotland would have to adhere to the economic requirements of the Bank of England, that is, austerity economics and attacks on working class living standards. The second point is the pledge to cut corporation tax, revealing the true nature of the SNP's pro-business agenda. It would entail a race to the bottom for tax rates on capital and for workers' living standards in Europe.

Many of the left groups which supported nationalism and a Yes vote tried to disguise the unpalatable policies that the SNP was preparing to implement by claiming that a Yes vote did not mean support for the SNP and that a move to independence would not necessarily mean an SNP government. Clearly this was whistling in the dark as there was no other political organisation capable of forming a government if the Yes campaign had succeeded. The SSP at least put forward an alternative economic strategy for a capitalist independent Scotland in its pamphlet "The Case for an Independent Socialist Scotland",

calling for a new currency controlled by the new Scottish state and the nationalisation of parts of the economy. The problem with this proposal is that it is essentially an effort to (re)create some kind of imagined social democratic utopia in a very small state. Any currency issued by such a state would be unlikely to find favour or much of a price among the sharks of finance capital. There is nothing about overthrowing the power of the capitalist class and its state machine in the pamphlet.

The lack of any serious economic programme for the proposed independent Scotland was compounded by the nervousness of finance capital. In the wake of the near collapse in 2008, banks and other major finance enterprises are now rightly considered essentially as deferred liabilities on the balance sheets of whichever state they are legally based in. The major finance institutions legally based in Scotland such as RBS, Lloyds Bank and Standard Life are each many times the size of the Scottish economy and therefore made clear their intention to move their legal domiciles to London in the event of a Yes vote. It was

unsurprising that the large sections of the working class voted to reject this economic blackmail by the bankers.

The key to bringing a significant section of the working class to the point of supporting Scottish nationalism was the activities of the organised left groups. The left in Scotland, particularly the groups originating in the Trotskyist movement, but also sections of the CP and even parts of anarchism (which has a history of political activity in Glasgow over many decades) have been subsiding into Scottish nationalism over the past twenty years or more. This trajectory is essentially a product of despair following successive defeats of the working class and the destruction of large sections of the organised working class. In essence it amounts to a switch from socialist and revolutionary politics, which hold that the working class is the sole agency for the liberation of humanity, to nationalism, which effectively is a movement in support of the local ('national') capitalist class.

This political collapse can now be seen on any of

the actions or demonstrations this nationalist left is taking part in by the switch of symbols from the red flag of socialism to the nationalist saltire. Even, on occasion, the lion rampant (flag of the Scottish monarchy) can be seen. This alliance of groups operated in both the official Yes campaign (the SSP were part of the Yes Scotland Advisory Board) and in the Radical Independence Campaign (RIC), which was set up by the International Socialist Group, a split from the Socialist Workers Party. The nationalist left was able to reach far further into the working class than the SNP and made all kinds of promises, many of them absurd, in order to move sections of the working class to support Scottish independence as a possible escape from austerity. It was this activity by the nationalist left that was a critical factor.

In the wake of the referendum it is clear that the nationalist left has benefited little, if at all, from its efforts to support the nationalists. Only the SSP has claimed any substantial gains in membership and it remains unclear if these are of active or paper members as no new activists have been evident yet. Rather it is the nationalists

themselves who have gained, with claims of large scale recruiting. Even former left activists, including a whole series of former leading members of the SSP, have joined the SNP. Other organisations like the Socialist Party have been driven to issuing appeals to the SNP to actually fight against austerity (vanishingly slim chance). The Scottish Labour Party has been driven into crisis with its leader resigning after watching some of its core areas vote for independence. At root this is due to the fact that the Labour Party is incapable of either campaigning for, or delivering on, the interests of the working class it claims to represent. Instead, it is an administrator of austerity. If it can crawl into government in the 2015 general election, then its base and organisation will be further smashed up as it delivers the attacks on living standards it has already promised.

It is important to note that Scottish nationalism is not driven by national oppression (unlike Ireland), but instead is motivated by the decay of capitalism. Essentially the destruction and disintegration of the economy is driving the

potential disintegration of the British state in the absence of the socialist left being able to put forward an alternative to capitalism.



Mr Innocent and Mary Poppins go to prison

Will McMahon

You may find it hard to have any sympathy with Denis MacShane and Vicky Pryce. MacShane was a pro-Zionist MP who was regularly sent on to Newsnight to bat for the integration of a capitalist European Union and believes that Tony Blair was the greatest ever Labour prime minister.

Pryce, a liberal economist who had worked in banking and oil, was joint head of the UK Government Economics Service, a partner and

chief economist at KPMG and director general for economics at the Department for Business Innovation and Skills.

The two were recently sentenced to jail for law breaking activity which in both cases took place a decade earlier and by simple twists of fate had later caught up with them. He falsely claimed Parliamentary expenses for work that was not Parliamentary. She perverted the course of justice by taking driving points for her then husband, Chris Huhne, the oleaginous Liberal Democrat MP who also did time.

As is now almost fashionable they have turned their spell behind bars into an opportunity to write a prison diary. If their diaries share anything it is a cumulative and coruscating attack on prison and the notion that it has anything to do with justice.

Their criticisms are fuelled in part by being dumbfounded by the chaos of the system. Denis MacShane is entered, Kafkaesque fashion, on to the prison system database at the high security Belmarsh as Ian McShane (the prison officer must

have recently watched Lovejoy) and so officially there is no record of him being in prison at all. In a passage that resembles an episode of *Porridge*, Pryce describes a transfer from her short stay at Holloway to East Sutton Park in a privatised vehicle that breaks down.

Another source of their ire is the disgust of the upper middle classes being exposed to the brutal regulation and harassment that working-class communities disproportionately experience. The cruelty towards prisoners that pervades the prison system is recounted in detail. Is this, they both ask themselves, how ordinary people are treated? Well, yes it is.

Each meet numerous people who, it appears, should never have been in prison. While confessing little interest in criminal justice while an MP, MacShane asks throughout his book *why* so many of the people he meets in the prison system are there. They do not seem to have done much wrong and have been the victims of simple legal injustice.

In part this is MacShane's way of arguing his own

case; unlike other MPs caught up in the expenses farrago he did not make a financial gain. Time and again he admits his wrongdoing but the feint is that he wants the reader to conclude he is Mr Innocent felled by the BNP who triggered the expenses complaint and Kier Starmer, then Director of Public Prosecutions, and John Lyon the Parliamentary Commissioner who simply took against him rather than others who had purloined much more for personal gain.

Pryce, who lied for her husband and put forward a defence of martial coercion, writes of drug dependent women, those imprisoned under joint enterprise laws and foreign drug mules who are, in the main, adjuncts to the activities of law-breaking men and are victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. Yet her description of life with 'the girls' at HMP East Sutton Park at times read like a stay in Mallory Towers with midnight feasts and jolly hocky sticks with herself a Mary Poppins in the clink.

Pryce concludes with a quasi-abolitionist perspective on the women's estate from a quasi-

feminist position noting that there are 'many women – and many men – who should at this moment not be in jail but either at home with their families or being properly looked after by social and health services in their communities.' MacShane concludes '...the Labour [Party] record is truly shameful, they have sought to profile themselves as being tough with criminals. But beating up men and women behind bars is childish and counter-productive.' Perhaps he forgets that his beloved Tony Blair was the driver of the 'tough on crime' policy that helped double prison numbers.

Both are privileged short-term residents and appear unaware of the protection that their fame offers them. Pryce served ten weeks, MacShane seven, hardly the long walk to freedom. On stepping out of prison they resume lives and careers of people with privilege. Left behind is a penal regime that selectively and ruthlessly punishes the poor, the drug dependent, the mentally ill and those traumatised by complex histories of sexual and physical abuse that require a public health approach rather than the

barbarism of the 23 hour lock-up experienced by prisoners in many prisons in Britain. MacShane, in a rather unBlairite fashion, argues that 'The Crown Prosecution Service and judges are about social order, not justice.' How true. If anything is a perversion of the course of justice it is the British penal system which, despite austerity, has continued to grow at an alarming rate.

Denis MacShane, Prison Diaries, (2014) Biteback Publishing

Vicky Pryce, Prisonomics, (2013) Biteback Publishing



The far right in Ukraine

Charlie Winstanley

The presence of the far right in Ukraine has become a hot topic of discussion in wake of the Maidan movement of late 2013, and the subsequent conflicts over Eastern regions of the Crimea and the Donbass. In Issue 3, *The Project* carried an article from Ben Neal on [The Far Right in Russia](#). This article will analyse the relative position of the far right in Ukrainian politics since the protest movements and civil war, and attempt to illuminate their likely future role in the

development of Ukrainian society.

Background

The over-arching crisis in Ukraine is overshadowed by long-term economic struggles. The Ukrainian economy is a basket-case, which has never managed to establish its own footing independent of its former colonial and political master Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The decade proceeding from the collapse saw a rapid decline of GDP, reversed only at the dawn of the Millenium. Since 2008 the Ukrainian economy has once again been in recession.

Ukrainian industry never managed to exorcise its export dependency upon former Eastern bloc countries and Russia, and has maintained a chronic import dependency on gas from Russia – the primary reason for its current payments deficit. In response to this import dependency, successive Ukrainian governments have pursued a policy of inflating the value of the Hryvnia (Ukraine's national currency) in order to relatively reduce the price of gas imports. The primary mechanism used

for this has been an attempt to attract foreign currency reserves which can be used to purchase Hryvnia's, maintaining their value. Thus, the collapse of exports since the 2008 crisis has severely lowered the treasury's balance of foreign reserves and had a knock-on impact on the already crippling burden of imports¹. This continued crisis appears not to be abating, with Ukraine's domestic industry unable to produce for the Western markets from which it desperately needs currency and no end in sight to her continued dependency on Russia's gas reserves.

Corruption has never been effectively tackled since the early 90s, and Ukraine's own network of oligarch's continue to control vast swathes of the country's wealth and political institutions². Ukraine is beset with high rates of unemployment particularly amongst the youth, a whole generation that has never known employment³. The population is also in rapid decline, expected to drop by 36% before 2050.

These economic factors feed into a political

environment where the left is non-existent. The Communist Party retains a hegemony over what exists of the parliamentary 'left', as the centre in Ukrainian politics has rejected all but neoliberal rhetoric to distance itself from the Soviet past⁴. The Communist Party's historical associations to Russia, furthermore, isolate its support to only certain sections of the population – significantly reducing its maximum levels of support.

Most Ukrainian fascist movements have thus been able to comfortably fit into the social-democratic vacuum between the mainstream and the far left, emphasising collective values of social justice and brotherhood⁵. The primary far right party in Ukrainian politics, Svoboda, sports numerous social democratic policies in its programme – including the nationalization of all resources which possess strategic importance to the state – and the nationalization of all agricultural land to be leased at affordable rates to peasants and citizens⁶. Far right ideology in the Ukraine strongly emphasises collective Ukrainian unity, wealth redistribution and social equality amongst its core themes.

Historically speaking, Ukrainian nationalism has been the peculiar product of several key periods. The Cossacks of the Western Steppe in the 19th Century provide the first historical base of Ukrainian national identity, military societies with their own cultural independence from the hegemonic culture of the Russian Empire.

The next significant period in the development of a Ukrainian national identity, ironically, emerged from the early Bolshevik policy of *Korenizatsiya* (indigenisation) in which national minorities were encouraged by the early Bolshevik government to flourish as subversive and democratic movements against the traditional hierarchy of the Russian state and church. Korenisation went as far in the Ukraine as to tolerate the establishment of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as an alternative to the Russian – and under this period (through the 1920s until the early 30s) Ukraine developed its own cultural and intellectual elite centred in Kiev. The sudden and brutal reversal of Soviet policy towards regional autonomy and nationalities under Stalin, in which much of this cultural and intellectual elite were arrested and executed, left

a scar on the fledgling Ukrainian national consciousness which has lasted on to this day.

During the Second World War, the most significant development of far-right national mythology was represented by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) under the leadership of Stepan Bandera. Initially fighting alongside the Nazis against Soviet forces, the OUN were quickly illegalised under Nazi occupation after declaring an independent and autonomous Ukraine. Bandera was imprisoned until the end of the war, and the OUN respectively fought the Nazis, Soviets and also the Poles along the border – implicating themselves in numerous horrendous war crimes (including the massacre of as many as half a million Poles). Most far right organizations in Ukraine today ground their legacy in the history of Stepan Bandera and the OUN. National identity in the Ukraine is thus grounded very strongly in anti-Russian/communist feeling, and for this reason Europe has emerged as a plank of far-right policy – seen as a method of weaning off political and economic dependency from their Eastern neighbour.

Far right groups in the Ukraine

The far right were negligible in Ukrainian politics before 1998, after which parties like Svoboda began to regularly poll 3% in national elections (still lower than the 6% usually attained by the Communist Party).⁷ Svoboda was able to gain support after its support in the Orange Revolution, after which it was also granted a place back in Yushchenko's 'Our Ukraine' bloc (having been expelled in 2004).

After the 2008 crash, Svoboda made significant gains in 2009-10 elections in Galicia and took on numerous roles in local government. In national elections in 2012, the party won its place in the Ukrainian parliament polling 10.44% nationally and winning 37 seats.

Previously the Party had been a member of the Social National Party of Ukraine (SNPU), which it left in 2007, but retains informal links and conducts joint campaigns. The SNPU was an overtly fascist group, responsible for the formation of the paramilitary group 'Patriot of

Ukraine' in 1999 using the Nazi Wolfsangel hook as its symbol. Though Patriot of Ukraine was formally disbanded in 2004, it was re-established during the Maidan protests as a paramilitary wing of the Social National Assembly (SNA) and played a significant role in the protests.

The Social National Assembly has existed in Ukrainian politics since 1998, and would eventually form the backbone behind the Pravy (Right) Sector in the Maidan protests in 2013. Pravy Sector in turn united disparate groups such as Tryzub (Trident) Patriot of Ukraine/SNA, White Hammer and Carpathian Sich into one force during the Maidan.

Euromaidan protests

The Euromaidan protests presented an opportunity for far right groups to significantly increase their influence within Ukrainian politics. The protests were sparked by President Yanukovich's decision not to ratify the integration treaty with the EU in November 2013, and took the form of a militant occupation of Kiev's central

square 'The Maidan'. Incredible images of armed and disciplined units of Ukrainian protestors storming government buildings and attacking police lines poured into the Western press, the vast majority of which were displaying the fighting force of self-defence militias (sotnias) organised by Svoboda and various other factions of Pravy Sektor.

Kiev Town Hall was effectively occupied exclusively by Svoboda, whilst in the main square far right organisations had total visual and organisational monopoly over the environment⁸. Far right call and response chants were dominant in the Maidan crowd, traditional gender roles allocated to protestors, and the Nazi Wolfsangel hook of Patriot of Ukraine displayed prominently⁹. Self-Defence of the Maidan, the primary organisational bloc of the protestors, is controlled almost exclusively by Svoboda – and is organised into a patchwork quilt of 'Sotnias' (hundreds)¹⁰.

On top of this cultural influence over the protest itself, the far right also directly gained from the

collapse of the Yanukovich government. Svoboda in particular gained many prominent positions in the post-Maidan government, including the positions of Deputy Prime Minister (Oleksander Sych) the Ecology and Agricultural Ministries (Andriy Mokhnyk and Ihor Shvaika respectively) and acting Prosecutor General (Oleh Makhnitsky). Founder of Trident and leader of Pravy Sector, Dmytro Yarosh, sits as Deputy Secretary of National Security under Andriy Parubiy – founder of the SNPU. One of the first laws passed by the new government was the Law of Lustration, a key flagstone of the Svoboda program, formally banning former and present Communist Party members from all positions of government, as well as barring all civil servants who worked under the Presidency of Yanukovich for 5-10 years.

In the war which followed Maidan, after Russian annexation of the Crimea and the battle for the Donbass region, the far right have also established themselves in the form of numerous military battalions. Most notable of these is the Azov Battalion, set up by Pravy Sector, which has now been incorporated as a regular unit in the

Ukrainian army. Since the cessation of conflicts in the East, the Azov battalion has threatened to 'bring the fight to Kiev' and has predicted a 'new revolution' in the wake of the failure of the Maidan government to produce effective reforms¹¹. Svoboda also founded their own independent Sich Battalion to fight the war in the Donbass.

Ukrainian politics has clearly shifted far in the favour of the far right since Maidan – who have increased their influence at every institutional level of the Ukrainian government and state, as well as their visible and core ideological presence in a now highly politicised society. Now established militarily as well as politically within Ukrainian society, they are presiding over a period of increased political radicalism and violence – unopposed by any serious left challenge.

The far right are in the best position of all movements to mop up discontent caused in the wake of the failure of Maidan and Ukraine's continued economic problems. Political unrest continues in the capital, with thousands brought onto the streets by Svoboda in recently to

commemorate the Day of the Ukrainian Cossacks. Ukraine's peculiar dichotomy – ideologically separated from Russia but economically bound to it – is unlikely to resolve itself in the near future. In that time, the far right looks more than likely to grow.



Inequality: what really matters

Michael Roberts

Imagine a room with 100 hundred people. 90 people are so short they can hardly reach the door handle to get out. Another nine people are only high enough to get a drink from the table. But one person is so huge that his or her head hits the ceiling and bursts through it. Such is the scale of inequality and concentration of wealth in capitalist economies. Even the top 10% of wealth holders really own only their house that they live in along with maybe a reasonable pension. It's the

top 1% or even the top 0.1% who really have wealth in stocks, bonds and commercial property and businesses etc.

The country's five richest families (oligarchs) now own more wealth than the poorest 20% of the population, according to Oxfam. A handful of the super-rich, headed by the Duke of Westminster, have more money and financial assets than 12.6 million Britons put together. The poorest 20% in the UK have wealth totalling £28.1bn – an average of £2,230 each. The five top UK entries – the family of the Duke of Westminster, David and Simon Reuben, the Hinduja brothers, the Cadogan family, and Sports Direct retail boss Mike Ashley – between them have property, savings and other assets worth £28.2bn.

And this wealth gap is widening as a result of the ability of the better off to capture the lion's share of the proceeds of growth. Since the mid-1990s, the incomes of the top 0.1% have grown by £461 a week or £24,000 a year. By contrast, the bottom 90% has seen a real terms increase of only £2.82 a week or £147 a year.

But amid all the talk and debate about growing inequality of income and wealth around the major economies, what matters is who owns the bulk of stocks and shares, government bonds and property that can deliver capital income in the form of profits, interest and rent. Among British households, the poorest 20% don't have much personal wealth, but of what they do have, 51% is in the home that they part own (with the mortgage company). In contrast, for the top 20%, property wealth is only about one third of their wealth held.

The ownership of shares in the UK has shifted dramatically over the last few decades from individual ownership (now just 10% of all shares) to ownership by unit trusts (10%), pension funds (5%), banks (12%) and foreign investors (53%). In other words, most financial wealth is controlled by corporations and investment funds, pooling the savings and profits of the rich. The property-owning, shareholding democracy spun by Thatcher in the 1980s and since by the Tories is a myth.

And what really matters is not personal wealth,

but the ownership of the means of production. That gives you power as well as wealth – this is what oligarchs have. What is decisive for capitalism is surplus value (profit, interest and rent), not wage income or spending. Control of that surplus is key. The main feature of the last 100 years of capitalism has not been growing inequality of income. The main feature has been a growing concentration and centralisation of *wealth*, not income. And it has been in the wealth held in means of production and not just household wealth.

Three systems theorists at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich have taken a database listing 37 million companies and investors worldwide and analyzed all 43,060 transnational corporations and share ownerships linking them (see <http://www.forbes.com/sites/bruceupbin/2011/10/24/147-companies-that-control-everything/>). They have built a model of who owns what and what their revenues are, mapping out the whole edifice of economic power. They discovered that a dominant core of 147 firms through interlocking stakes in

others together control 40% of the wealth in the network. A total of 737 companies control 80% of it all. The owners and managers of these companies control the world.

This is the inequality that matters for the functioning of capitalism – the concentrated power of capital. Britain's oligarchs are part of this nexus.

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The First World War – not everyone fell in line

Kathrine Brannan

Michael Gove, until recently Minister of Education, took advantage of this year of remembrance of the outbreak of world war in 1914, and of his personal position of power, to vilify those who describe that bloody world massacre as anything else than a 'just war', a 'noble cause' fought by 'conscious believers in king and country, committed to defending the western liberal order.' <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article->

Sound familiar? Indeed, not only was this war a mere prelude to the hundred million people who died in the wars of the twentieth century but the repeated war incursions of the early twenty first century, and most recently into Iraq and Syria, seem equally based on no clear concept of what is meant to be achieved, either by the elites ordering the wars or by those obeying the call.

Just as today, journalists, music hall artists, schools and celebrities were recruited to the cause of war propaganda. The Poet Laureate Robert Bridges, an influential writer, declared in a letter to The Times on 2 September 1914 that the war was "primarily a holy war... between Christ and the Devil." Referring to Germany, he continued, "the infernal machine ...will leave desolation behind it and put all material progress back for at least half a century. There was never anything in the world worthier of extermination, and it is the plain duty of all civilised nations to unite to drive it back into its home and exterminate it there." The German invasion of Belgian with its brutal

massacres and burnings of towns was used to justify the validity of this call.

Lord Kitchener, the Minister for War, asked the country to give him 100,000 volunteers. His advertisements billed the conflict as 'the greatest war in the history of the world.' Within eighteen months Kitchener had two million volunteers... adrenalin, hype and herd instinct all running high.

There *were* other voices. Two days before the declaration of war, Keir Hardy, socialist and pacifist addressed 10,000 people at an anti-war rally in Trafalgar Square. Hardy had campaigned vigorously in the hope that socialists across Europe would prevent war. Later, the 'No-Conscription fellowship Manifesto' of 1915 (written by 'conscientious objectors' or 'the conchies' as they were called) proclaimed "... we DENY the right of any Government to make the SLAUGHTER of our fellows a bounden duty." Prison, labour camps, physical torture and humiliation would become the lot of the Conchies in Britain. More than 6,000 were sent to prison and were

deprived of the right to vote after the war.

In France the war mobilisation was characterised by a sacrificing of the class struggle waged by the important French socialist movement in favour of the *union sacrée* demanded by French patriotism faced by 'the enemy on the doorstep.' Jules Guesde, a well-known militant socialist leader explained his support for the government: "When the house is on fire it is no time for controversy. The only thing to do is to give a hand with the buckets." [i] A much-feared general strike by the anti-militarist left was never called. Jean Jaures the beloved leader of the French United Socialist Party and a committed pacifist was assassinated on 31 July 1914. In normal times riots would have ensued and, in fact, the cavalry were ready, but the workers remained calm.

An unusual call to arms came from the pages of the *Bonnet Rouge*: "Notwithstanding the ardent pacific wishes of the French government, we have now entered into war. My brother Socialists let us forget *The International* and our red flag. Our song is now *The Marseillaise* and our flag is the tricolor!"

The full extent of the 'solidarity' of France in face of war was most evident in the day after mobilisation was proclaimed. On that day the French government virtually abdicated in favour of the army on the basis of a decree of 1878 which had the effect of suspending many civil liberties and putting general police powers in the hands of the Army; in practice, a declaration of martial law.

As patriotic and nationalistic fever mounted in all the countries involved, fighting on the Western Front degenerated into a war of attrition with the French army, particularly, bearing heavy losses. These included the 389,000 casualties of the 1916 Battle of Verdun. In December 1916, General Robert Nivelle, new commander-in-chief, persuaded the French and British Prime Ministers to back a major offensive against the Germans. His offensive centred on the Chemin des Dames ridge on the Aisne River, between Soissons and Reims. General Nivelle carelessly boasted and broadcast his plans for the new offensive, scheduled to begin on 16 April 1917. The Germans, forewarned, withdrew their troops from their forward trenches to strongly fortified defences. They

slaughtered the French infantry as it advanced with tremendous élan into what was now a deserted killing ground, laced with murderous machine gun and shellfire.

By the next day there were over 100,000 French casualties. Still, Nivelle insisted on further offensive waves, although it was soon obvious to all but Nivelle that the traumatised French infantry was incapable of further useful advance.

Rumours of the carnage spread back through the rear areas to stoke up the resentment that had already arisen concerning the unprecedented slaughter in the Verdun Salient. Of particular concern, was the report that the disillusioned men had advanced into battle baa-ing like sheep to the slaughter. Arrogant and faulty strategy, as well as lapses in security and timings, led to the French gaining 500 metres of territory at the price of 120,000 casualties by 9 May 1917. The morale of the troops crumbled and by the end of 1917 widespread mutinies swept the French army. Thousands of troops quit their front line duties. Nine infantry divisions went out of action. Forty-

five others were considerably affected and refused any more futile offensives while pressing for better conditions. Out of this misery came the famous French anti-war song 'La Chanson de La Craonne' which remembers that devastated village and invites the rich to come to the trenches where those with nothing were giving their lives to defend the upper class's wealth.^[ii] The song was prohibited in France until 1974.

Nivelle was finally replaced by General Petain who delivered better conditions whilst simultaneously rounding up the 'ringleaders' of the mutinies. Over 100,000 soldiers were court-martialled; 432 were sentenced to death; 55 were officially shot although many more were shot without sentence^[iii]. A fragile order was restored. However there were strikes.

Black shawls and robes of mourning were prevalent amongst the women workers throughout France, many of whom were working in munitions factories. By the end of the Nivelle offensive, about one million French soldiers had been killed and yet the commitment to conflict

continued relentlessly. The government and the media linked discontent and factory strikes to an 'upsurge of defeatism.' Anti-war French socialists who tried to attend a peace conference in Stockholm were refused passports. In November 1917 there was a crack down on strikes that had been called as a protest against hunger and inequality rather than against the war itself.

Similarly in England, in the severe winter of 1917-18, with fuel and food shortages causing starvation and malnutrition, strikes broke out. By May 1918 there were strikes in 48 towns involving 200,000 workers. Leaders of the strikes were imprisoned but eventually there were compromises made with the rationing system and, as in France, the government were able to quash any further politicising of the movement.

In Germany, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were imprisoned for their opposition to the war and had to mobilise from their prison cells as best they could. The social democrat parliamentarians backed the war and betrayed all they had previously fought for in a once powerful movement anchored

in Karl Marx's writings and actions.

But as the war entered its third and fourth years discontent grew, driven by hardship, poverty, hunger and discontent with the war. Inspired by the revolutionary events in Russia in 1917 large numbers of workers went on strike; sailors in the German navy mutinied and were supported by workers. The revolutionary events in Germany of 1918-19 are not the subject of this article but they demonstrated both the potential for change and role of the social democratic leaders in opposing it.

The screaming clatter of gunfire killed an average of five and a half thousand men every day of the war. It blocked out the voices of those who did not say 'yes' to this mass slaughter. However, there was no resounding international 'no' either. What was holding back the linking and strengthening of these protests across the nations? Would mobile phones, twitter, face book have been the missing link between Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Hardie, the French mutinous soldiers, the Conchies, the German strikers and the Russian revolutionaries?

Or is there something that, even with all the communications technology of today, stops us from defining ourselves, before any national identity, as members of the international working class?

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[i] Brogan, France under the Republic, p483

[ii] The song's chorus is sung in [Oh! What a Lovely War](#) (1969) and several versions can be seen or heard on [YouTube](#)
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1984

Review: 1984

Edmund Potts

Review of "1984" by George Orwell; a new adaptation created by Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan. (Almeida, Headlong and Nottingham Playhouse)

Right from the start, this adaptation of Orwell's classic is an assault on the senses – strobe lighting, mechanical rumblings and static interference all compete with one another to

distort whatever fidelity the reconstructed narrative may have to the 'real' events of Winston's life. Framed initially by a reading group's discussion of Winston's diary in a post-Ingso society (to say "post-totalitarian" would be questionable given the apparent survival of the ubiquitous telescreen) we are immediately plunged at breakneck speed into the timeline which begins with the germination of Winston's dissent. A clever device which could otherwise have been trite and stale is in fact invigorating, as it allows a kaleidoscopic outward projection of Winston's damaged mind to act not only as the familiar protagonist, but also as a surrogate for the audience.

The production is cleverly staged and sequenced, with much made of a very constrained set. The inevitability of Winston's fate manifests itself increasingly with the passing of time through the unravelling of reality within the play's little universe: characters appear unbidden in temporally or logically impossible situations; sequences of events in repetitious reworkings of a single scene continue to play out even in the

conspicuous absence of essential actors, most shockingly in the case of Syme who is cleverly unpersoned not only from the self-censoring minds of his fellow characters, but also from the audience's expectation of his presence. It is hard to escape the impression that this decomposition of ordered reality is a by-product of the torture machine to which Winston is wired near the narrative's conclusion, which shatters his sanity and causes his neural connections to misfire haphazardly. He becomes not so much an unreliable narrator as a destroyed one. And after all why should this not be the case right from the start? As O'Brien chidingly asserts, Winston *has always known* what awaits him in Room 101.

The performances given are heartfelt and all the more affecting for their sometimes surprising physicality. Power – or rather powerlessness – is expressed by futile attempts to break or rail against the fourth wall. Characters plead, question aloud, or even scream viciously (the two-minute hate is cleverly directed towards the audience) and yet not a single voice from outside is expected to stir. Total inability to change one's

circumstances is the overwhelming theme here and is compounded with a rather cynical undertone by the fact that acts of symbolic destruction against the set are ultimately shown to be purely superficial. This strikes a blow at one's gut and any hopes one might have for an affirmation of the power of love, when the most striking destruction of scenery takes place in the course of Julia and Winston's first romantic liaison. Once again later on, a feeling of impotence manifests itself with the unpleasantly voyeuristic way the audience are obliged to observe Winston and Julia's more private moments via 'hidden' cameras tucked away in their bedroom.

Overall I feel that the measure of this adaptation's success (as someone who has read the book many times) is in that I will now feel the echo of its sensory bombardment whenever I read the book for some time to come. There is no feeling of cheap imitation or superfluous contextualisation with allegories of latter-day assaults on our civil liberties. What is presented is a faithful presentation of the original story – the struggle of one man against a monstrous dictatorship – with

enough creative verve and style to keep any audience gripped from beginning to end.