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Sinn Féin's Southern Strategy

The Long March to the Centre
by Kieran Allen

Plus:

Editorial on Palestine

Mike Gonzalez on the Lessons of Chile 50 Years on

Sinéad Kennedy on Women's Oppression

and more...

IMR

IRISH MARXIST REVIEW

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Editorial

Brian O'Boyle



04 On October 7, the façade of peace in Palestine was shattered when thousands of Hamas fighters entered Israel, tearing down fences erected to cage them and tearing down the complacency of the Western elites who have ignored the plight of the Palestinians for a decade.¹ The figures for casualties are disputed, but there were certainly hundreds killed, including soldiers and civilians. More than 200 prisoners were also taken. Israel was quick to denounce Hamas as a death cult; a terrorist organisation hellbent on killing Jewish people without any wider objective.

In reality, Hamas was reacting to two overriding geo-political challenges – a near twenty year blockade of the Gaza Strip and the immediate possibility that relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia would be ‘normalised’, leaving the Palestinians ever more isolated and forgotten. October 7 shattered the status quo by forcing the world to pay attention again. It also torpedoed Benjamin Netanyahu’s wider strategy of squeezing the Palestinians into submission through military containment, creeping annexation, and ‘normalisation’ with Israel’s historic enemies. As one observer put it,

Hamas declared in the most clear, painful, and murderous way possible, that...the idea that [Palestinians] can be bypassed via Riyadh or Abu Dhabi, or that the 2 million Palestinians imprisoned in Gaza will disappear if Israel builds a sufficiently elaborate fence, is an illusion that is now being shattered at a terrible human cost.²

The Israeli response has been brutal and predictable. Since October 7 they have drowned Gaza in a sea of bombs, enacting collective retribution on a people who refuse to simply disappear into the Sinai. As we go to press, 8525 people have been murdered including 3542 children. At least another 1050 children are buried under the ruins that increasingly characterise much of Gaza. Israeli planes currently bomb day and night with impunity. Since their campaign began, the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) have dropped an average of 42 bombs per hour, killing an average of 15 people and maiming 35 more. The IDF has also stopped fuel entering Gaza, so there is little machinery capable of rescuing people when buildings crash down around them. Parents often know their children are buried but can't physically get to them. Others, write their children's names on their limbs so they can identify their remains later on. Collective punishment of the Palestinians is subjecting 2.3 million people to a shared trauma that will never leave them. Indeed, such is the brutality, that UNICEF has recently defined Gaza as a "graveyard for children and a living hell for everyone else".³ The United Nations have gone further, denouncing Israel for war crimes, including collective punishment, the targeting of civilians and the siege of Gaza.⁴

Western Hypocrisy

This viewpoint is shared by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch but not the Western ruling classes. When Vladimir Putin cut water and electricity to the Ukrainian people, he was rightly denounced as a war criminal. European Union President, Ursula Von der Leyen, was particularly forthright, stating that,

Russia's attacks on civilian infrastructure, especially electricity, are war crimes. Cutting off men, women, children from water, electricity, and heating, with winter coming — these are acts of pure terror. And we have to call it as such.⁵

But when Israel did the same, and worse, Von der Leyen travelled to stand with Netanyahu, declaring "We are friends of Israel. When friends are under attack, we stand by them. Israel has the right and duty to defend itself".⁶ The same rhetoric has been trotted out by Joe Biden, Rishi Sunak, and Olaf Scholz, allowing Israel to murder Palestinian civilians with virtual impunity. The idea that Western leaders support a rules-based humanitarian order is just one more casualty of Israeli terror – this time torn

to shreds by their own hypocrisy and double standards.

The reality is that considerations of power and profits have always formed the basis of their calculations, not human beings, or universal human rights. Since the Second World War, Russia has been one of the major opponents of the West, while Israel was created to project the power of the Western ruling classes further into the Middle East – a region with significant geo-political importance and vast resources of oil.⁷ For the American elites, a partnership with Zionism meant the ability to replace Britain as the major power in the region, while for the rest of the Western elites it meant guaranteed oil and a block on communism. Zionism understood its role and acted accordingly – promising its Western masters an imperialist outpost in return for impunity during the Nakba of 1948, the forced expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their land to create the space for an Israeli state.⁸ Since then, the Israeli ruling class has been defined by two key characteristics; they have consistently pursued the interests of the West and they have continued to annex historical Palestine, while making those Palestinians that remained into second class citizens. The logic of Zionism has always been to clear the remaining Palestinians from their land in another

Nakba. The Israeli ruling class have pursued this objective for decades, but until recently, they also used the Oslo Accords, signed between 1993-1995, to give the impression of working towards a compromise.

The Oslo Accords

Ostensibly, Oslo created a pathway to peace by creating a Palestinian Authority (PA) with responsibility for limited self-governance in parts of Gaza and the West Bank and the wider promise of a future Palestinian state on borders set by the 1967 war (surrendering land lost from 1948-67). In reality, the promise of a two-state solution proved the perfect cover for Israel to annex territory and undermine what was left of Palestinian sovereignty and the Palestinian economy. The rhetoric of compromise always masked a deeper strategy of domination, as Yara M. Asi explains,

“The Oslo Accords were not really about peace or justice... [instead, they] cemented occupation as a permanent form of governance, giving Israel almost complete control of Palestinian borders and the Palestinian economy”.⁹ Most Palestinians distrusted the Israelis from the outset, with Edward Said speaking for many when he suggested

the Oslo Accords were designed as “an instrument of Palestinian surrender”.¹⁰

This, coupled with the corruption of the Palestine Authority (PA), explains the subsequent rise of Hamas and the Second Intifada which began a mere five years after Oslo was signed. Within Israel, the fig-leaf of a two-state solution actually helped to push politics to the right, as the Zionists had the perfect cover for every incursion; every violation of international law, while in the West, the Accords allowed the elites to abandon the Palestinian people altogether. No matter how often Israel broke international law or committed human rights abuses the stock response was always the same – we understand the Palestinians have rights, but they must work through the Oslo Accords.

The growing influence of the far right in Israel coupled with growing resistance by ordinary Palestinians explains the subsequent period, as ongoing occupation and injustice have been punctuated with periods of brutal violence, always disproportionately inflicted on the Palestinians. Trump’s election in 2016 shifted the calculus, giving the Israeli eliminationist right the possibility to fulfil their historic objective – namely, erasing Palestine by pursuing a new Middle East strategy with the central

objective of isolating Palestinians from their historic allies in the Arab world.

Netanyahu’s Trump Card?

Barely a month into his Presidency, Donald Trump stood with Netanyahu to announce a new Middle Eastern peace deal that would include all the players in the region. Ostensibly, Trump’s ‘normalisation strategy’ was designed to bring peace, but the real objective was twofold. On the one hand, the agreements would strengthen US power in the Middle East as states moved further into its sphere of influence. On the other hand, it would create the conditions for a final Nakba, this time freed from the historic constraints imposed by Israel’s Arab neighbours. Symbolically, Trump’s real intentions were evident in his decision to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem – which was proposed as the capital of a future Palestinian State as part of the Oslo Process and has always been the historic capital of Palestine.

In the wider region, meanwhile, Trump’s strategy was to offer the same benefits that US ruling classes always offer less powerful states – loans, military aid, trade deals, and local strategic advantages - in return for accepting that Israel is a legitimate state with a

legitimate claim over the historic land of Palestine and a legitimate right to defend itself. On 15 September 2020, Israel signed the Abraham Accords - a normalisation agreement with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain which established full diplomatic relations and recognised Israel's sovereignty. This was followed by further agreements with Morocco and Sudan; but the main objective was always to agree a deal with Saudi Arabia, which, in the words of one observer would.

08 Be a tectonic shift in Middle East geopolitics...Israel would benefit from normalisation relations with the Saudis – long seen as the “holy grail” of potential normalisation agreements for the country. The Saudis, in turn, would see their interests advanced through strengthened U.S. partnership...But this deal could also have serious implications for the future of the Palestinian national movement and further afield for the role of China in the Middle East.¹¹

Trumps strategy facilitated a lurch right in Israeli politics, as the most radical Zionists saw their opportunity to finish the job begun in 1948. This was made explicit by the current far right Finance

Minister, Bezalel Smotrich, whose aim is to annex the rest of the Palestinian territory and turn Israel into a Jewish theocracy.¹² Under Smotrich's watch, the number of settlements has escalated, as have attacks on Palestinians. There are now 500,000 settlers in the West Bank and 200,000 in Occupied East Jerusalem. The rate of expansion has been 16.1% over the past five years, but for Smotrich and his ilk, this is still not enough.¹³ He wants all of the land cleared of Palestinians, starting with the West Bank. Indeed, prior to October 7, 2023, had been the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since the UN began keeping records in 2005.¹⁴ Assaults on popular new resistance groups like the Lions' Den meant a dramatic escalation in the use of administrative detention by Israel and the PA, as well as deadly assaults on resistance strongholds in Jenin, Nablus and Tulkarm.¹⁵ Faced with these wider geo-political realities, Hamas attacked, and Israel is now retaliating.

For some in the Israeli elite, they finally have their chance to unleash hell on the Palestinians, but there are a number of dangers for themselves and the Western ruling classes that are important to identify. The first is the reality that the war against Hamas is unwinnable, with the potential to inflict unimaginable harm on the people of the region but also on

the reputation of the West.¹⁶ Short of annihilating the Palestinians or physically driving them into Egypt and Jordan, this latest act of brutality will create what it has always created among colonised and occupied populations: ongoing resistance and perpetual conflict. The severity of the attacks coupled with the hypocrisy of the Western elites also risks radicalising new layers in Europe and America – a potential that socialists everywhere must look to exploit.

As Israel continues to bomb defenceless people behind the shield of Western imperialism, it will also have ramifications in the global South, with the Financial Times recently reporting that the strident support for Netanyahu by Biden and the Europeans has caused a major backlash. One senior diplomat told the paper that “we have definitely lost the battle in the Global South. All the work we have done with the Global South (over Ukraine) has been lost... They won’t ever listen to us again.”¹⁷

Far from strengthening the hand of Western Imperialism, the fallout from Trump’s normalisation process might yet push developing countries closer to China. The situation might also get beyond despots and reactionaries in the Arab states as resistance from the streets erupts against the brutality of the IDF. Tens of thousands have repeatedly taken

to the streets in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and the West Bank. While in Bahrain, one of the signatories of the landmark Abraham Accords, the regime has caved to mass pressure, expelling the Israeli ambassador – an early indicator that a return to normalisation is likely to be impossible. For readers of the IMR the next steps should be clear. We must throw ourselves into the struggle for Palestinian liberation, building movements of solidarity across the country to undermine the US and European consensus that enables Israel. In so doing, we should also confidently challenge the wavering centre left, including Sinn Féin, seeing this moment as an opportunity to deepen support for independent Irish foreign policy and against militarism. This movement has the potential to fundamentally weaken the NATO-led imperial bloc that has consolidated itself since the invasion of Ukraine. Their agenda is to end neutrality in Ireland and re-militarise Europe, but in a world wracked by capitalist crises, there is now an opportunity to push back and forge global resistance. The stakes could not be higher – in our thousands, in our millions we are all Palestinians.

In this Issue

Despite showing strong support for Palestine over many years, Sinn Féin (SF) have recently refused to vote with the left on motions to expel the Israeli Ambassador – both in the Dáil and in local councils. At the same time, they have supported conservative government-led motions that include Israel's right to defend itself within the limits of international law. Acknowledging the right of an apartheid settler-state to its own self defence is a backward step that surely cannot be lost on SF's more radical supporters. But this is also part of a more general move to the centre by a party now seeking to reassure the Irish elites, and their American backers, that it can be trusted in government. Charting Sinn Féin's shift to the political centre, Kieran Allen argues it is part of the general play book of nationalism as it seeks popular support by talking left at the same time as it aspires to govern a system controlled by the right. When the Adams-McGuinness leadership first sought an electoral base in the North, they positioned SF to the left of the SDLP. This made sense, as the Provos recruited disproportionately from the working classes while more affluent nationalists were more likely to vote for the SDLP. As they established this base, however, SF began to pivot towards pan-

nationalism and, more importantly, towards conservative forces in the US to bolster their campaign for a united Ireland. Governing the Irish tax haven is one more step towards their objective, but it will rely on putting the interests of big business ahead of SF's working class supporters. This, in turn, will force them into endless contradictions as their rhetoric remains to the left of the establishment even as the substance of their policies moves towards the centre.

The dangers of attempting to implement radical policies from within the structures of the bourgeois state is also taken up by Mike Gonzalez, who uses the fiftieth anniversary of Pinochet's counter-revolt in Chile to remind readers of two central lessons learned in the struggles of the 20th century. The first is the impossibility of a reformist road to socialism. The second is the necessity of relying on the self-activity of the working class, particularly when they are in open revolt. As Gonzalez makes clear, Salvador Allende was not merely misguided and outmanoeuvred. His politics suffered from a major weakness - informed by Stalin's idea of a popular front - that assumed the armed forces are neutral in a bourgeois society and that the ruling class can be nudged towards socialism if the working class is kept under control. Allende paid for his mistakes with his

life, but he also cost thousands of others, as the right viciously destroyed the sparks of working class revolution with their ‘Caravan of Death’ following Pinochet’s coup in 1973.

In her analysis of the family under neoliberalism, Sinéad Kennedy argues that one powerful way to think about oppression is through the sacrifices and repressions, the options taken, and forgone by women that ensure their own happiness is often sacrificed to the happiness of the family unit. Analysing the double burden placed on women in the workforce, the different experiences of working class and wealthier women and the deeply conservative nature of the Irish state, she argues for a sophisticated version of Marxist social reproduction theory that understands that women’s oppression cannot be understood outside the class dynamics of capitalism but must never be reduced to these dynamics.

In his introduction to artificial intelligence (AI), Memet Uludağ argues that the radical left must not fall into fetishising this powerful new technology nor into denouncing it as the harbinger of doom. Like all technologies created under capitalism, AI will very likely bring massive potential to humanity at the same time as that potential is distorted and often fully subverted by the logic of capital. Reminding readers that

the same class relations exist today as in Marx’s time, Uludağ encourages us to think about the issue dialectically – to see the vast potential and the often destructive reality as two sides of a technology being created within a class society; and to see the outcomes and future uses of AI as being dependent on the balance of class forces in society.

Mark Walsh takes up similar themes arguing that bourgeois society has been responsible for the greatest flowering of the sciences in human history at the same time as this knowledge has been deployed in the interests of the ruling classes often to the detriment of humanity as a whole. Insisting that science is a collective endeavour built up through the trial and error experiences of millions of people, Walsh argues against the ‘Great Man’ theory of science, rooted as it is, in elitism and class snobbery. Newton and Einstein certainly made amazing discoveries, but they relied on the vast network of merchants and artisans, mechanics, and engineers to create the knowledge that they synthesised and improved. Their ideas also flowed into a class society which deployed them to create technologies used to control the lives of millions of people - industrial machinery and atomic energy. Like Uludağ, Walsh encourages

his readers to think about science as a dialectical process containing enormous potential for positive transformation but also with a destructive side that is currently putting our collective futures in peril.

Taking up this theme, Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin argues that the logic of capitalism is driving a climate emergency that cannot, and will not, be solved under this same logic. Competitive accumulation continues to inform the major decisions of the major corporations, ensuring the planet is heading for temperature rises that could eventually make life impossible. Expecting capitalists to resolve a crisis that they are creating is like asking a tiger to give up meat and live on grass. Understanding this, Ó Ceannabháin explains the hollow strategies being pursued by the ruling classes, as they engage in climate theatre or outright denial, all-the-while continuing with business as usual. Ó Ceannabháin then looks at the weaknesses of the climate movement arguing that without ecosocialist politics and a major turn to the working classes, the movement has little chance of success.

In the final article in this edition, Paul O'Brien lays out one of the central arguments in his new book *Seán*

O'Casey: Political Activist and Writer. O'Brien argues that O'Casey's art was deeply informed by the struggles of the working classes during the early part of the 20th century. O'Casey was himself inspired by his involvement in the Dublin lockout but also by his strong conviction that nationalism could never deliver for the working classes, whether it was the conservative nationalism that undermined the revolution in Ireland or the fascist nationalism that did so much to destroy the lives of working people in the first half of the 20th century. O'Casey always knew which side he was on, and O'Brien argues that this is at least partly responsible for the vibrancy of plays like *The Shadow of a Gunman* and *The Plough and the Stars*.

Editor

Brian O'Boyle.

Endnotes

¹ The author would like to thank Conor Reddy and Mark Walsh for useful suggestions.

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¹⁴ 2023 becomes the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank as Israeli military launches fresh attack on Jenin. Medical Aid for Palestinians @ <https://www.map.org.uk/news/archive/post/1483-2023-becomes-deadliest-year-for-palestinians-in-the-west-bank-as-israeli-military-launches-fresh-attack-on-jenin-refugee-camp>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alex Callinicos. 2023. Biden backs Israel in unwinnable war. Socialist Worker @ <https://socialistworker.co.uk/alex-callinicos/biden-backs-israel-in-an-unwinnable-war/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Sinn Féin's Southern Strategy

The Long March to the Centre

Kieran Allen

14 Outside the glare of publicity, Sinn Féin (SF) leaders have embarked on a new project. They are meeting business lobby groups and multinational firms to offer an assurance that a Sinn Féin led government will be supportive. In September 2022, Mary Lou McDonald travelled to Silicon Valley to meet senior executives from Google and Salesforce. She said that ‘winning FDI [foreign direct investment] and strengthening our business relationship with the US will continue as a key component of Ireland’s economic strategy.’¹ Housing spokesperson, Eoin Ó Broin has met landlord lobby groups and builders. Pearse Doherty, the party’s Finance spokesperson, summed up the message when he claimed that big business has nothing to fear from a Sinn Féin government. “They know that Sinn Féin isn’t going to go after them,” he said.²

And the party has some work to do. Firstly, its voting base is skewed towards the lowest social class. In advertising jargon, lower paid workers are referred to as the C2DE classes. In a poll taken in March 2022, Sinn Féin was scoring 47 percent in this category compared to a mere 13 percent for Fine Gael.³ Traditionally Fianna Fáil (FF) and particularly Fine Gael (FG) have relied on a cohort drawn from developers and upper professionals – accountants, barristers, auctioneers, among others. A shift to a Sinn Féin led government would naturally cause a certain anxiety. Secondly, there are different factions within the upper class and different avenues into wealth. A large section of the indigenous Irish rich has invested heavily in property. These are worried about how some Sinn Féin policies might affect their property portfolios.

Thus, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) recently prepared a slideshow for clients, advising them to speed up asset sales and boost pension pot contributions before Sinn Féin comes to power.⁴ Thirdly, Sinn Féin sometimes defines itself as a leftist party and at European level is a member of the radical left grouping, GUE/NGL. More significantly, in recent years it has adopted policies that appeal to a working class base by stressing the need for government intervention in the market. In brief, Sinn Féin currently occupies a contradictory position. To enter government, it must win a sizeable chunk of working class votes by promising real change from the hundred year dominance of FF and FG. But as it has no intention of uprooting the power of wealth and capital. Instead, it wants to work with big business to minimise any hostility from within the elite. This is a difficult balancing act best summarised by Pearse Doherty when he spoke at the Dublin Economic Workshop - a gathering of right wing economists. Sinn Féin, he claimed, had not moved to the centre, but the centre "has moved decisively towards Sinn Féin".⁵ It was a neat rhetorical twist, but the substance of both formulations was similar. Sinn Féin sees itself as occupying the new centre of Irish politics.

Party strategists are more than aware of these contradictions and have developed mechanisms by which they think they can be overcome, at least in the short term. There are three key elements to their thinking. One lies in a quiet jettisoning of specific left wing policies while continuing a vaguer radical rhetoric. The second, is using the cover of establishment hostility to neutralise left wing warnings about potential coalition with Fianna Fáil. The third involves an implicit encouragement of working class passivity rather than mobilisation. Let's look at each in turn.

Policy shifts

Sinn Féin is primarily a nationalist movement whose core objective is the unification of Ireland. The type of Ireland or the class that dominates have always been secondary issues. Its rhetoric can therefore shift left or right depending on the situation, but there is one important limitation. While the modern Sinn Féin grew out of a split with the supposedly leftist Official Sinn Féin – a party that adopted a Communist Party inspired strategy of reform in the six counties – it first won a base in the working class communities of the North. The original strategy of the republican movement was a purely military one as the IRA focussed

on bombing city centres and assassinating members of the security forces. Inevitably, after a working class upsurge over Bloody Sunday in 1972, support for this strategy waned in the 26 counties. In 1997, for example, Sinn Féin scored just 2.5 percent of the Southern vote, even after the peace process had begun. More importantly, it was only able to increase this vote to 7 percent before the economic crash of 2008.

The party soon realised that to grow it had to combine its traditional nationalism with a distinct appeal to workers in the South. It understood that the upper professionals were wedded to the comfort of the 26 county state, and it needed working class support to advance. They had followed a similar left turn to challenge the SDLP in the north and so the core slogan of Sinn Féin in the South became ‘Giving workers and their families a break’.⁶ The flexibility inherent in nationalism meant that the actual content of that slogan could change, however, and in recent years, the rate of change has accelerated. At one level the orientation to the poor and to workers is a longstanding aspect of Irish republicanism. Even when Sinn Féin defined itself as anti-communist in the early 1970s, it promoted seemingly radical economic policies. Thus *Éire Nua*, the political programme inspired by

Ruairi O’Bradaigh, and Dáithí Conaill, contained the following statement,

We are opposed to personal ownership of productive property such as a large farm or a large factory. This type of ownership involves the exploitation of other people’s labour for personal gain and is alien to republican principles. This type of enterprise should be co-operatively owned. Private enterprise will have no place in key industries and our incentives will favour co-operative projects as the most socially desirable. Only resident citizens shall be allowed to have a controlling interest in an Irish industry.⁷

There was a clear contradiction in restricting a controlling interest in industry to Irish residents and the wider claim that all personal ownership involved exploitation. This blatant discrepancy barely mattered, however, as *Éire Nua* was viewed, even by its own supporters, as a form of window dressing to accompany a military strategy that had total primacy. A seemingly more militant leftist language arose with the ascent of the Adams-McGuinness leadership. The IRA was declared to be a socialist organisation and, in a document, written for the IRA known as the ‘Gray Document’, Adams argued,

Furthermore, with James Connolly, we believe that the present system of

society is based on the robbery of the working class and that capitalist property cannot exist without the plundering of labour. We desire to see capitalism abolished and a democratic system of common or public ownership. This democratic system, which is called socialism, will, we believe, come as a result of the continuous increase of power of the working class.⁸

This rhetoric was designed to accompany a new phase of the IRA struggle after the experience of the H-Block campaign. Adams' argument was that the South was a neo-colony of Britain and hence the revolutionary armed struggle centred in the North was in the vanguard of a wider struggle to break the grip of colonialism. In his book *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, he spelled this out. The Southern state, he argued,

Developed a neo-colonial relationship in which it was possible to protect [British] economic and strategic interests without the nuisance of having to occupy, garrison and administer the 26 counties. The economy of the 26 counties is dominated by foreign capital; massive proportions of the profit generated in Irish industry are exported in particular to Britain. The resources of

the state are controlled and exploited by foreign interests and even the ruling class is not based principally on native capitalism but is an agent class, acting as agents of foreign capital.⁹

Unlike the more idealistic economic strategy of *Éire Nua*, this seemed to offer a harder analysis that attracted many leftists to the movement. That there was little evidence to justify the argument that the South was a colony of Britain barely mattered.¹⁰ The republican movement, it was thought, offered a way by which Ireland could become the Cuba of Europe.

Yet this perspective also faded away when, after 1989, republican strategists suggested that the US – freed from its rivalry with the USSR – could play a 'progressive' role in an Irish peace process. And as a nationalist party, Sinn Féin was not overly concerned about US imperialist activities elsewhere – only Irish unification mattered. A significant turning point came when Gerry Adams, who once denounced 'capitalist exploitation', welcomed George Bush to the North even as he was launching a brutal war in Iraq. The slide to a more moderate political outlook had begun.

However, the central strategic objective remained. How to win a popular base in the South by becoming a voice for working class aspirations. The rhetoric shifted to a more Keynesian type of reformism whereby the state regulates capital in the interests of workers. There are, however, varieties of Keynesians. On the left stand those who argue for a redistribution of wealth to increase working class demand. On the right, stand those Keynesians who suggest that fiscal measures that do not affect wealth concentration are needed. As Sinn Féin moves closer to government, it has adopted a more conventional Keynesian position which it hopes will not frighten business. It has watered down some of its most progressive tax demands and welcomed changes to the European union fiscal rules.¹¹

Early indications suggest it has achieved some success. Thus, the ratings agency S&P has re-assured business leaders that ‘the Republic’s openness to trade and its flexible labour market ... will remain in place ‘regardless of the election outcome in 2025’.¹² The *Irish Times* has perceptively added that Sinn Féin’s ‘policies are not viewed, internationally at least, as a radical departure from what we’ve had up to now’.¹³ In other words, the multinationals are more comfortable

with Sinn Féin’s assent – even if some Irish property owning upper professionals are more than a little worried.

It is instructive to note how exactly Sinn Féin has shifted its policy decisions to appease business interests. Let’s itemise them in turn.

Corporation Profits: In 2006, Sinn Féin suggested that Corporation Tax should be increased to 17 percent and claimed this would not be punitive.¹⁴ More recently, the party has supported the 12.5 percent rate and now backs the establishment party consensus that it should rise slightly in accordance with OECD guidelines.

Wealth Tax: In 2011, Sinn Féin called for a 1 per cent Wealth Tax. It stated that, ‘This would be an income-linked Wealth Tax for high-earners levied on their assets over €1million in value, excluding working farmland’.¹⁵ In 2023, Sinn Féin dropped their demand for a wealth tax.

Capital Gains Tax: In 2011, Sinn Féin called for an increase in Capital Gains Tax to 40 percent. This is a tax on the gains from the sale of assets that have increased in price. In 2021, the party merely asked that ‘consideration should be given to reform’ Capital Gains Tax.¹⁶ In 2023, this disappeared from Sinn Féin’s alternative budget altogether.

Income Tax: In the past, Sinn Féin proposed a 7 percent levy on incomes above €100,000. It then became a 5 percent levy on income over €140,000. This has since been reduced to a 3 percent levy on income over €140,000. Pearse Doherty has assured high earners that it will not really hurt, claiming that those earning €150,000 will pay just €300 more in tax.

Mortgages: In 2020 the party manifesto called for ‘giving the Central Bank power to cap mortgage interest rates.’ It noted that in 2015, Sinn Féin brought forward legislation that would allow the Central Bank to cap mortgage interest rates charged by Irish banks.¹⁷ In 2023, the party dropped this policy and instead proposed a limited subsidy for mortgage holders.

All of this represents a distinct shift in economic policy, but it should not be exaggerated. There is still a score of tax measures on *passive* wealth. Thus, the party favours a 5 percent stamp duty on properties valued at over €700,000, an increase in commercial stamp duty and an increased tax on share buy backs. It wants a second home tax of €400 and an increased capital acquisitions tax. It wants to scrap the notorious Special Assignee Relief Programme that offers tax concessions to individual foreign executives, for, among other things, sending their children to private schools. But while these proposals are welcome, they are extremely modest and do not hit

at the core of the profit making machine. Specifically, they are not targeted at capital where it is deployed for productive purposes. Or put slightly differently, none of these measures will upset big corporations even if some of their individual agents are somewhat upset.

On one level Sinn Féin is being consistent. Despite its left credentials, the party has never spelled out ways by which the economic power of capital could be lessened. It has repeatedly failed to call for the nationalisation of banks or private hospitals. Even at the height of the Covid epidemic it never challenged Big Pharma on their use of intellectual property to restrict access to vaccines. It refuses to challenge EU directives such as the forced ‘liberalisation’ of the electricity market by calling for an end to privatisation and the restoration of a not-for profit ESB mandate. Many of the most recent shifts have flown beneath the radar because the party continues to speak left while quietly accepting the logic of ‘capitalist realism’.

This ‘realism’, however, may turn out to be built on shaky foundations. One of the main reasons why the party has been able to appear more radical and yet not tackle the power of wealth is that it assumes that the current government surplus can be distributed more equitably. In other words, it thinks there is no need to discuss real wealth distribution when the state coffers are so full of the receipts

generated by its functioning as a tax haven. The problem here – leaving aside the political immorality of supporting a tax haven -is that this appears to be coming to an end. Globally, receipts from corporate tax dodging are dropping and an international recession looks to be looming. If these trends continue, Sinn Féin’s balancing act of promoting a little more equality while appeasing big business can easily fall apart.

Opening to Fianna Fáil

After the Electoral Commission increased the number of Dáil TDs in August 2023, a flurry of speculation began in the media about the composition of the next government. The most common prediction was a SF-FF government. An *Irish Independent* poll claimed that ‘Support for Sinn Féin forming a historic coalition government with Fianna Fáil has grown as political parties begin their preparations for the next general election.’ This was based on poll figures which showed 42 percent backing this option (But rather significantly the poll also suggested that another 42 percent wanted to exclude Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil from government).¹⁸ In Belfast, the *Irish News* ran the headline, Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil edge towards a deal’. It wrote,

It is almost a century since Fianna Fáil was founded as the result of a bitter split with Sinn Féin, and both

sides have taken up diametrically opposing stances throughout the course of their subsequent histories. However, there are now increasing indications that the rivalries could be finally set aside after the next Irish general election through the creation of a new coalition arrangement between the two groups.¹⁹

One could dismiss this as media speculation or even a deliberate attempt to set the political agenda. However, there are good grounds for thinking that this is the trajectory of Southern Irish politics for two main reasons. First, Fianna Fáil is split on the issue of coalition with Sinn Féin. Despite Micheál Martin’s bitter rhetoric about Sinn Féin ‘infecting’ the minds of the young, half his own party have declared a preference for joining in coalition with Sinn Féin. One government minister who spoke anonymously told the *Journal* that the party is split down the middle. ‘Fifty per cent of the party would find going in with Sinn Féin extremely difficult. The other half would have done it the last time around.’²⁰ The *Irish Times* has also reported that 20 Fianna Fáil TDs support coalition with Sinn Féin, including senior figures such as Jim O’Callaghan, who has stressed the need for the party to refurbish its clientelist base among workers.²¹ Party leader Micheál Martin is angling for a job in Europe and should he depart, the prospect of Fianna Fáil embracing a

future coalition with Sinn Féin dramatically increases.

Second, Sinn Féin strategists are also attracted to the option. One reason is that by staying open to this possibility, it attracts vital second preference votes. It also makes it easier to isolate Fine Gael (FG) as the real ideological right and win voters accordingly. SF strategists are also keenly aware of how the party managed to replace the SDLP in the North as the main nationalist party. It sees Fianna Fáil as their equivalent in the South and thinks it can eventually gobble up this divided and aging party. There is also a much bigger consideration. Namely, by playing a conventional electoral game, Sinn Féin can argue that on mathematical grounds they have little choice. If they win close to 70 seats in the next general election, they can look to Fianna Fáil as their minority coalition partner. Moreover, the presence of Fianna Fáil would help to ease Sinn Féin's entry into the establishment. It would add an assurance to big business on top of the policy shifts already made and insulate it against any further pressure from the left.

The problem is that many Sinn Féin supporters are vehemently opposed to this opening. They know that FF and FG have dominated the country for one hundred years and want a government that finally excludes them. To deal with this sentiment, Sinn Féin has constructed

a rhetoric which is repeated like a mantra by its leading spokespersons. David Cullinane sums up the position as 'Obviously after an election, we'll talk to all parties. The ideal preference would be a government without Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. Obviously, that is in the hands of the electorate'.²² Sinn Féin's message to its working class electorate is that it wants a government without FF or FG. But it does not describe this as a left government as this would indicate political incompatibility. It merely asserts that this is an 'ideal' and, realistically, it will stay open to looking to Fianna Fáil as Fine Gael have already ruled this option out.

This rhetoric is flawed, however, as it gives no guarantee to a disillusioned electorate that they can shape government policies. Labour and the Greens have already gone to the country with radical sounding programmes only to claim later that these become irrelevant as they become bound by coalition programmes for government. Even if Sinn Féin moved more to the centre there is a basic incompatibility between their apparent policies and that of Fianna Fáil. The latter party have a long record of corruption and favouritism for business cronies. They have been major players in constructing a neoliberal Ireland where there are weak public services for working people. And even as minority partners in coalition, Fianna Fáil would block any vestige of radicalism in Sinn Féin's agenda. They would act as the watchdogs for privilege,

engaging in regular blackmail to sink a SF-FF government if it dared to upset the elite in any way. This is why no less a figure than Bertie Ahern can claim that FF would hold its own as a minority partner in such a coalition. He noted ironically that ‘the revolutionaries of today are usually the conservatives of tomorrow.’²³

If Sinn Féin were to rule out coalition with FF in advance of an election, this would add a new dynamic to Irish politics. It would send out a clear signal that the party is determined to bring real change. It would galvanise those sections of the electorate ground down by cynicism and convey a message that this time around there will be a difference. It would offer hope to the many young people who are considering emigrating because of the housing crisis. If such a move were combined with a real effort to establish Vote Left-Transfer Left rallies, across the country, it would draw thousands of new activists into a Corbyn style movement. The fact that Sinn Féin are fearful of such a move indicates that their real intentions are very different. They want to slot into an Irish establishment that makes minor changes for working people.

Passivity

Politics can take on a life of its own which party strategists cannot control. A crucial factor here is the degree of working class mobilisation which can create new discourses and aspirations. Good examples of this phenomenon are the water charges and Repeal movements in the last decade. The water charges movement drew tens of thousands of working class people out of passivity and cynicism. In so doing, it laid the ground for a shift left in politics. The Repeal movement inflicted a decisive defeat on the bishops and rendered their agenda of control over sexuality obsolete. However, clever manoeuvring by Fine Gael meant that it did not lead to a full break with the fake liberalism that characterises the modern day Irish establishment.

Sinn Féin, however, has little sympathy with a project of creating mass movements. Its whole history indicates a deep cynicism about people power. In the past, the party functioned as a support unit for the IRA. The armed campaign was defined as the ‘cutting edge’ of a movement which would drive Britain from Ireland. Even when there was a mass response to Bloody Sunday, with the burning of the British Embassy, the only advice republicans offered was join the IRA. Later during the H-Block campaign which also garnered significant

support in the South, the advice was to approach Fianna Fáil's grassroots for backing. The idea that workers could act in support of political prisoners did not appear on the republican agenda. It took the small forces of the revolutionary left to galvanise support for worker walk outs in Dublin, Waterford, and Dundalk.

This history of armed struggle substituting for a mass movement, has been re-configured today. Now it is asserted that a Sinn Féin led government will bring the change. Workers need only wait until change comes from on high. If anything, the implicit message is that too strong a dose of working class militancy might upset the electoral advance of Sinn Féin. Best to discourage criticism and avoid advocating militancy. This studied moderation almost wrong-footed Sinn Féin during the water charges campaign. For a period, they refused to endorse a campaign for non-payment until the mass of people forced them to change their opinion.²⁴

It is not as if Sinn Féin has created working class passivity in the South, but rather that they echo the trade union bureaucracy and have strategically set out to replace the Labour Party as its main voice. Here the key structural process which underlines working class passivity in the South is social partnership. Once again, the party has

moved from an ambiguous attitude to supporting the process whereby union leaders do deals with employers and government that effectively avoids industrial action in favour of national dialogue. In 2005, for example, Sinn Féin featured a debate between leading opponents and proponents of social partnership at a conference in Dublin. At the time, party spokesperson, Austin Morgan, said that the process 'is not in the interest of workers and it was not designed to deliver for the disadvantaged and the low paid'. He went on, however, to hold open the prospect of a different form of social partnership if Sinn Féin ever became the government.²⁵

In more recent times, prominent Sinn Féin trade union officials such as Anne Speed or Louise O'Reilly in SIPTU have become ardent supporters of social partnership. They have advocated deals whereby workers give up their right to take strike action except in limited circumstances. The focus of Sinn Féin has been on promoting progressive union legislation in the Dáil. Thus, they have proposed increases in the minimum wage, bans of bogus self-employment and a legal right of workers to collective bargaining. While these are welcome, they do not promote working class self-activity. Instead, the party sees industrial disputes as a problem and calls for

greater support for the Workplace Relations Commission. Thus, it writes that,

The best way to avoid industrial disputes is to have genuine engagement and respect for all sides. Sinn Féin recognises the Workplace Relations Commission as a vital piece of our industrial relations architecture and would allocate additional resources to it in order to secure and maintain its role in arbitration and dispute resolution.²⁶

It does not publicly back groups of workers such as the water workers or ESB workers who have taken industrial action against the advice of SIPTU leaders. The problem here is that social partnership has been a disaster for workers. Union membership in the South has dropped from 33 percent of workers in 2005 to a mere 22 percent today. The fall among youth and those in the private sector is even more pronounced. The last pay deal for public sector workers saw a settlement which amounted to a pay cut as workers gained a 3 percent rise while inflation raged at over 7 percent. And while a major strike wave has broken out in the North, the confidence of Southern workers has dropped to an all-time low.

There is, of course, an inverse relationship between worker confidence

and a prospective new government. The more workers engage in real struggle, the more the parties claiming to advance their interests are tested. The less they struggle, the more parties can rely on a general rhetoric while encouraging workers to wait for change from on high. The Sinn Féin message of waiting for ‘progressive change’ to be delivered via a new government clearly finds an echo in the current situation.

Can the balancing act last?

Various factors, therefore, assist Sinn Féin in maintaining its support base while shifting to the centre. The party’s strategists have devised ways it can still be seen as a radical alternative even while shifting policy discreetly. Its openness to a Fianna Fáil coalition is masked with a declaration that it would ‘prefer’ a government that excludes them in an ‘ideal’ world’ which they think will never exist. The party receives a substantial hearing because of the sell out of the Labour Party during the years of austerity and due to the more recent decline in struggle in the South. While Sinn Féin is by no means responsible for this, its strategic objective is to develop a close relationship with a union bureaucracy that has found a comfortable niche within Southern institutions. None

of this, however, is to suggest that Sinn Féin's balancing act is guaranteed success. Instead, there are substantial dangers ahead.

The first arises from how wider geopolitical conflicts impact on Irish politics. For many liberals, the transition to Joe Biden represented a return to normality compared to the presidency of Donald Trump. In reality, Biden has not only continued US foreign policy, he has accelerated attempts to restore US imperial hegemony, particularly over China. As this journal has previously argued, Putin's invasion of Ukraine was viewed by the US as an opportunity to restore its leadership of the 'free world'. It is recovering from its ignominious defeat in Afghanistan by fighting a proxy war against Russia and demanding full support from its EU allies. One result has been a growing pressure for greater EU militarisation and synchronisation of its foreign policy to dovetail with that of the US.

These wider moves have put Sinn Féin under pressure. As a prospective party in government that wants, as Mary Lou McDonald indicated, close relations with the US, it cannot be seen to take an overtly anti-imperialist position in global conflicts. Sinn Féin's policy on neutrality has, therefore, undergone subtle changes. The party remains committed to the

general concept of neutrality, defining it as an aspect of national sovereignty. But it has also begun to re-define neutrality in more general terms. Thus, the party has dropped its opposition to Partnership for Peace, a NATO programme to tie non-members into a closer relationship with it. The NATO website states that it is

a programme of practical bilateral cooperation between individual Euro-Atlantic partner countries and NATO. It allows partners to build up an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation... (it will), build strengthened security relationships between NATO and non-member countries in the Euro-atlantic area.²⁷

The party has also dropped a commitment to undo PESCO, which Fine Gael has pushed through. PESCO or Permanent Structured Co-Operation is an EU inspired programme which commits governments to increase military spending to 2 percent of GDP and to develop 'interoperability' with other EU armies. As Ireland currently spends just 0.4 percent on defence, this will mean a fivefold increase – from about €960 million to about €4.5 billion annually. In 2020, Sinn Féin stated that PESCO was the first step in the creation of an EU army and that 'in Government, we will ensure Ireland plays absolutely no part in PESCO'.²⁸

However, Matt Carthy, SF foreign affairs spokesperson, now argues that:

Ireland's future participation in Pesco and Partnership for Peace must also be assessed based on those principles (underpinning neutrality) and should never undermine our capacity to continue playing an important role in UN Peace Keeping missions.²⁹

The *Irish Times* has captured the rationale that lies behind Sinn Féin's shift of position. As part of its preparation to join a government - possibly with Fianna Fáil - the party is re-defining its relationship with the EU as the tectonic plates of global politics are shifting towards greater imperialist competition. Here is the paper's description of Mary Lou McDonald's performance in the Dáil when Ursula von der Leyen appeared.

Sinn Féin's approach to the European Union has evolved significantly. Mary Lou McDonald's recent Dáil speech, in response to the Oireachtas address by European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, illustrated this very clearly. The note that McDonald struck on the EU was so positive that her script, subject to a few tweaks, could have been delivered by Micheál Martin or Leo Varadkar. She spoke warmly about the positive achievements of the EU and about von der Leyen. In particular, she was

markedly warm not only about the EU's solidarity with Ireland since Brexit, but also about the EU's strong response to Vladimir Putin's aggression in the Ukraine.³⁰

The repositioning of the party has accelerated during the current crisis in Palestine. Traditionally, the party has been a strong supporter of Palestinian rights, drawing a connection between their experience of colonialism and the Irish experience. However, as it seeks to align more directly with the EU, it has quietly shifted its position. This became very clear in response to a government resolution in the Dáil. The Government's motion asserted "Israel's right to defend itself", but there was no such assertion of the Palestinian right to resist occupation and attack. The motion had the usual Western world's weasel words of sympathy for Palestinians, but included nothing that would rein in Israel's violence. The motion said Israel's actions "must be in line with international law" even though this was debated the day after Israel had murdered 500 Palestinians in Gaza after bombing a hospital.

Sinn Féin proposed three amendments to the Government motion, but these were all defeated. It then voted for the Government motion. By way of contrast, People Before Profit proposed a counter

motion to the Government, that included an assertion of the right of Palestinians to resist occupation and had calls for the expulsion of the Israeli Ambassador. It also called for the dismantling of Israeli apartheid. But shamefully, Sinn Féin did not support the People Before Profit motion and it fell.

These shifts have undermined the party's credibility among left wing activists, but its leadership think that this is a price worth paying. They calculate that only a small minority of the most politicised activists are concerned. Broadly, they assume that if they increase their general rhetoric on Palestine, the details of supporting a resolution which proclaims Israel's right to defence will go under the radar. They also assume that the electoral support for Sinn Féin comes mainly from a working class that is concerned with domestic issues.

This compartmentalisation can break down, however. For one thing, a large section of workers does follow party responses to big global issues such as war or climate change. Moreover, once a party embraces a strategy of moderation the drawbridge that protects it from media pressure is undermined.

Sometimes this dynamic emerges suddenly around small but symbolic issues. Thus, when the party housing

spokesperson, Eoin Ó Broin re-tweeted an image of the modern-day Gardaí assisting an eviction, the right wing press went wild. How dare he impugn the good name of a police force who, it was claimed, could never act like the Royal Irish Constabulary. Ó Broin quickly caved in and telephoned the general secretary of the Association of Garda Inspectors and Sergeants to say that 'I stressed it was not my intention to offend, criticise or drag An Garda Síochána into a political controversy.'³¹ Ó Broin also attacked the right wing economists who effectively run the Department of Finance. These periodically advise against any major increase in public spending. In one of his sharper remarks Ó Broin said,

I think John [McCarthy] should be sacked... You have a guy who knows nothing about housing, nothing at all. He is a very, very orthodox, I would argue, almost evangelical economist in terms of his way of seeing things. He was the kind of economist that advised government to do the kinds of things that they did before the crash".³²

Once again there was a predictable howl of outrage from the political establishment and the right wing press. How dare he question the neutrality and integrity of the senior civil servants who

steer the Department of Finance? Once again, Ó Broin backed down, effectively swallowing what he described as ‘his own ill-judged comment’. As the party comes nearer to government and embraces the possibility of coalition with Fianna Fáil, these types of climb down will grow.

The Radical Left and Sinn Féin

There is an unspoken paradox at the heart of the relationship between the radical left and Sinn Féin. The majority of the latter’s voters transfer left because they see progressive parties as closer to their own aspirations. According to one calculation, 33 percent of Sinn Féin transfers went to the radical left, including People Before Profit, Solidarity, and Independents for Change. In Dublin, it was even more pronounced, with 48 percent transferring to the radical left.³³ Yet the radical left presents genuine criticism of Sinn Féin and has been more in tune with upsurges from below such as during the water charges. It is in Sinn Féin’s interest to capture as many radical left votes as possible before entering government to insulate itself from criticism. It will do this by claiming to offer the best chance of ending the domination of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. ‘Why waste a vote on the left when Sinn

Féin will deliver the change’ will be its argument.

Against this discourse, the radical left needs to defend itself. It can point to Sinn Féin’s march to the centre and ask the simple question: if it moves so fast before an election, what will happen when it is surrounded by the unelected Irish state, and its EU allies, after one? Far from being a wasted vote, every No 1 vote for People Before Profit or other left formations is a signal to the Sinn Féin leadership that they must halt their drift to the establishment. By making it clear that it will have no truck with Fianna Fáil, the radical left shows there is a real divide in Irish politics. Its very presence in the Dáil ensures that politics is not some conventional game whereby all parties are potential coalition partners with each other. It indicates there is a basic incompatibility between parties that want to break from the neoliberal tax haven model and those in the political establishment.

The radical left needs to present its own positive vision of what a left government can do. This is outlined clearly in the People Before Profit pamphlet, *The Case for a Left Government*. It argues that a left government would use public land for public housing and would form a state construction company to increase supply. It would impose rent controls and

a cap on mortgage payments. It would raise the minimum wage to €15 an hour. It would ban US troops from Shannon and withdraw from PESCO. It would move quickly to separate church and state ending religious control of our schools. This positive left agenda offers a real connection to the aspirations of many workers.

The radical left fights on the electoral terrain but does not confine its activities to this sphere. The key to any substantial left advance lies in the mobilisation of large numbers of workers in their own interests. So far, social partnership has represented a huge block on this type of activity but there are limits to it. Last year, for example, the best organised workers were forced to take pay cuts, and many will now seek to restore their living standards. This will put pressure on union leaders who cannot forever remain content with a declining membership. Advocating more pay cuts can only accelerate the decline of the wider movement and many union activists will no longer stomach this.

However, even if there is not mass mobilisation of organised workers, the key to the advance of the radical left lies in people power movements which can arise from a variety of issues. Neoliberal Ireland has left thousands of people bereft of basic services. Tenants face

evictions: disability campaigners demand basic services; on top of it all, there is a massive housing crisis. In every area, the ruthless pursuit of profit tramples over people's needs. Conventional politicians claim they can fix all this without changing the structure of society. In reality, it takes mass mobilisations to wrest the simplest reform out of the Irish establishment. The more we engage in this type of pressure today, the more any new government will be forced to respond to a risen people.

In making all these arguments, the radical left does not see Sinn Féin as its enemy. Quite the contrary, we often fight alongside and urge them to join united fronts. Our criticism of the party's trajectory is of an entirely different order to our attacks on the current political elite. While we sometimes stand shoulder to shoulder with Sinn Féin, we never encourage any sort of unity with our real enemies – FF and FG. Our criticisms of their current direction are made from the vantage point of solidarity with the aspirations of their grassroots members and supporters. Some of these will agree with us – but still stick with Sinn Féin. Others will look for more radical left alternatives. The job of the radical left is to patiently explain and win as many as possible to its cause.

Endnotes

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Chile 1970-73: The Brutal Repression of Workers Power

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32 On September 11, 1973, General Augusto Pinochet, flanked by the leaders of the armed forces of Chile and backed by the Cardinal, appeared on television to announce that they had seized power in a military coup. Hawker Hunter planes had already bombarded La Moneda, the presidential palace in the capital, Santiago, where Salvador Allende, the president elected in 1970, was trapped with his closest supporters. He died later that morning. Part of the political mythology of Latin America is that military coups are frequent. It is true of some countries, but Chile had a reputation as a stable bourgeois democracy, with regular elections and a professionalised army. Since 1973, Chile has become synonymous with repressive military regimes that torture and murder trade unionists, peasant farmers and students, like those of Uruguay and Argentina in the 1970s. Chile, it seemed, was a model to be followed.

Until the coup, Chile was not especially present in the consciousness of the rest of the world. Trapped in a narrow coastal belt between the Andes and the Pacific and limited to the south by the Antarctic and to the north by the Atacama Desert, it was the last frontier in the Spanish Conquest of the Americas. The Spanish conquistadors, led by Pedro de Valdivia, crossed the Atacama in 1541 and were faced with the determined resistance of the Mapuche people of the south. They proved ferocious enemies, until their lands were finally occupied in 1558. Under their colonial rulers Chile produced wheat and silver to finance Spanish imperial expansion. The wars of independence at the beginning of the 19th century against the collapsing Spanish empire created the Latin

American republics, Chile among them. The colonial class fought to defend the old regime until independence was won in 1818. A glance at the Chilean telephone directory tells a story of the new European emigration that followed independence; the names (such as Edwards and Subercaseaux) – reflect the migration of a new middle class with a dream of growing rich on Chile's natural resources. The first boom was the trade in guano, the droppings of seabirds on the unpopulated islands off the coast which was both an effective fertiliser and a component of gunpowder.

In the 1850s, copper, silver and coal mining developed, attracting European speculators and investors, particularly British banks. And it was the same bankers who supported Chile's war against its northern neighbours, Peru, and Bolivia (the so-called War of the Pacific (1879-83) for the nitrates mined in the desert and for control of the saltpetre (called *salitre* in Spanish) essential to the production of explosives. Peru lost the mineral rich Atacama and Bolivia the port of Tacna, its only outlet to the sea. The broken Peruvian economy then began to rebuild with loans from the same British banks. Capitalism has no scruples when profit is involved!

By 1881, 78 percent of Chile's export earnings came from mining (nitrates and copper) and the industry boomed until the discovery of artificial nitrates at the beginning of the First World War undermined an industry which the new middle class, mostly of European origin, were the beneficiaries. The older landowners had suffered badly in the economic recession of 1883 and had entered alliances with the newer capitalists to maintain political control. It was this ruling class alliance that persisted, in different forms, well into the 20th century.

The 53,000 nitrate workers and the coal miners provided the base for Chile's emerging trade unions. The leading figure in the workers movement of the early 20th century, Luis Emilio Recabarren, was a revolutionary socialist who formed a socialist party in 1912. He was also the sole Chilean delegate to the first Comintern Congress in 1919 and later founded the Communist Party in 1922. He was immensely effective and popular, but like many leading revolutionaries, he fell foul of the Stalinist leadership of the Comintern and committed suicide in 1924. His importance remains unacknowledged.

The collapse of the nitrate industry virtually destroyed the working class movement and radicalised a middle class which saw its privileged position disappear almost overnight. That early history had direct political consequences for the next generation too when another economic crisis led to political turmoil and heightened struggle. The immediate consequence of the crisis was the creation in 1931 of a military regime under Carlos Ibáñez, but in June 1932 a socialist junta took power that included Colonel Marmaduke Grove as defence minister: he would later become president for twelve days. The short lived government of which he formed part passed some radical measures in its 100 days of existence. All foreign capital held in Chilean banks, for example, would be forfeited to the state, half a million free meals were to be distributed daily to the poor, and an agrarian reform bill was proposed. However, the socialist republic was itself quickly overthrown, and Grove was arrested and imprisoned.

A year later, Grove was a founder member, together with Salvador Allende, of the Socialist Party of Chile, which declared itself Marxist-Leninist. In 1938, as part of a coalition known as the FRAP, Allende stood for the presidency – as he would several times before his election in

1970. The FRAP was a popular front, following the policies of the Comintern, based on collaboration with bourgeois parties - the Chilean Communist Party adopted the same position, as did its Spanish equivalent in 1936. Allende always described himself as a Marxist, but in practice his interpretation of Marx was social democratic: he was on the right of his party which always contained a range of revolutionary currents too. Allende was a doctor and popular figure. He stood again as the candidate of coalitions of the left in presidential elections in 1952, 1958 and 1964, unsuccessfully. The election of 1964, however, was significantly different. His main opponent then was Eduardo Frei, a Christian Democrat.

The 'Revolution in Liberty'

Future U.S. vice-president Nelson Rockefeller's Latin American tour in 1958 was met by demonstrations and protesters wherever he went, while the Cuban Revolution the following year was celebrated in a wave of anti-imperialist enthusiasm. Washington knew that their allies were deeply unpopular, including the eternal candidate of the Chilean right, Alessandri, the scion of one of the country's most powerful families. When Guatemala elected a progressive government in 1951, promising agrarian

reform and internal democracy, a military coup supported by the U.S. and the United Fruit Company that owned half of its land bombed the capital and threw out its popular president, Jacobo Arbenz.¹ Faced with widespread support for Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution, Washington looked for other ways to exercise their power over Latin America.

In 1961, John. F. Kennedy founded the Alliance for Progress, with the promise of supporting economic and social development in Latin America. At the same time, a number of European academics were recruited to devise strategic alternatives to the spectre of revolution. The ‘Revolution in Liberty’, (to be set in motion by a Christian Democracy), proposed a series of reformist measures to counter the influence of the Cuban revolution - and Chile was chosen as the first location for the experiment.

It had a stable parliamentary system based historically on political alliances, armed forces which appeared to stand outside politics, a potential social base in a rural population still deprived of land by the continuing power of the landowners, and a middle class which was demanding educational reform and

economic development. The Chilean economy was by then almost wholly dependent on copper mining which was controlled by two U.S.-based multinationals, Kennecott, and Anaconda. Transferring ownership of the industry to Chile would satisfy the demand for its nationalisation that united the working class and most of the middle class, while bringing new revenue into the coffers of the State.

But instead of nationalisation, Frei offered “Chileanisation” - passing the industry into the hands of Chilean private capital. After the multinationals failed in their attempts to block the distribution of Chilean copper in the global market, they were paid wildly overpriced compensation which undermined any hopes of redistribution. But the promise embodied in the ‘Revolution in Liberty’, however false, awoke hopes and expectations among ordinary Chileans – and anger and protest when the promises were not kept.

By the end of the sixties there were confrontations and strikes across Chile and a deepening social crisis. An agrarian reform programme also stalled, in part through the organised resistance of landowners who used the courts to stop the process. Landless workers and

peasant farmers responded by occupying land by direct action. The promise to deliver economic and industrial growth accelerated the process of migration from the country to the cities by poor rural populations seeking work. One result of this was a housing crisis which provoked large scale land occupations in the cities where the self-built *poblaciones* gave precarious shelter to the poor.

In 1969 the situation led to a confrontation between the military and squatters in the southern city of Puerto Montt which resulted in several deaths. The Chilean higher education system was notoriously elitist, and in that same year a nationwide student protest marched the length of the country demanding the democratisation of the education system. Far from calming the demand for change, the “revolution in liberty” reinforced it, intensifying the mobilisations as the campaign for the presidential elections of 1970 approached.

A different Chile

The highest number of strikes were recorded in 1969 as workers demanded the improvements in wages and living standards that Frei had promised but not delivered. The failure to enact agrarian reform and redistribute land to small

farmers also produced a rising tide of land occupations which the landowning class failed to repress. The student movement was demanding a transformation of Chile’s conservative, Catholic dominated education system and the rural migrations to the cities in the search for work created new confrontations around the lack of housing. At the same time, Allende’s election campaign was marked by a cultural revolution of its own. A generation of musicians and song writers, many of whom learned their craft from the singer-songwriter Violeta Parra, produced a new music built on folk and popular traditions from Latin America and performed by new groups like Quilapayun and Inti-Illimani, who set Allende’s election manifesto to music in the “Canto al Programa”. And on the walls of the cities an anonymous movement of young artists – the Brigada Ramona Parra- painted huge and beautiful murals, symbolic of a new public art. One of Inti-Illimani’s songs echoed the atmosphere in the streets.

Esta vez no se trata de cambiar un presidente, Sino de crear un Chile bien diferente.

This time it’s not about electing another president, but of building a very different Chile.

Allende's political career had developed through a series of electoral coalitions with other parties in pursuit of "an alliance with the progressive bourgeoisie", the popular front he had advocated in the thirties. Though he described himself as a Marxist, and his strategy as "The Chilean Road to Socialism", he was committed to achieving his goals within the framework of Chile's bourgeois democracy. The presidential elections of September 1970 gave his Popular Unity (UP) coalition the largest number of votes, just over 36 percent, but not the absolute majority that would ensure his confirmation in post by Congress. Jorge Alessandri for the right wing National Party won 34.9 percent and Radimiro Tomic, a left Christian Democrat 27.8 percent. The bourgeoisie were clearly divided, but this did not explain Allende's victory. He had won the support of a mobilised population at a time of deepening social crisis. To assume the Presidency in November, however, Allende needed the support of others in Congress. And the price of that support was an agreement he signed with the Christian Democrats called the *Statute of Guarantees*, a series of concessions which were to prove of

critical importance, though the Statute was never publicly acknowledged.

It was clear from the outset that bourgeois parties would not support any radical measures, so the framework of UP's reforms was the existing legislation. Allende's political programme operated within the constraints imposed by a coalition of reformist parties and a perspective announced as 'designed to win over the middle sectors'.² In many ways, the programme went little further than Frei's; it promised economic growth, based on raising the level of consumption, and a general wage rise, thus taking up the slack in the economy. On the question of agrarian reform, it undertook to carry through the provisions of Frei's 1967 Agrarian Reform Law, redistributing land to small farmers by dividing up the great estates. Most importantly, its first act in government was to legislate for the nationalisation without compensation of copper, the source of the bulk of Chile's export income, although as we have seen, private companies had already withdrawn most of their investments from Chile during the Frei period and had been paid compensation, which left very little for the Chilean state. The programme sought to take on the Chilean oligarchy – that 2 percent of the population whose wealth

stemmed from the land, but whose interests now extended into industry, finance, and the press. Nonetheless, compensation to expropriated landlords was to be generous. And while the oligarchy was attacked, it was made clear that 'enterprises where private ownership of the means of production will remain in force will in terms of numbers remain the majority'. Overall, the plan was to nationalise 150 out of 3500 firms (and that figure was further reduced at a later stage), leaving 60 percent of industry outside the public sector.

38 The Statute of Guarantees clearly established the limits of UP policy. Signed in October 1970, it was an undertaking by Allende to respect the autonomy of the police, and the armed forces, and to refrain from interference with the press and mass media, education, and the Church. The Christian Democrats still had a majority in parliament, which they used to try to block and undermine every UP initiative. In effect, the price of Christian Democrat support for Allende's assumption of the Presidency was the assurance that UP would not attempt to extend its control into any other institution of the state, nor use it to mount any ideological challenge to the existing regime.

The mass movement that had brought Allende to power, however, knew nothing of the Statute, and the level of class struggle increased throughout 1971, given an extra impulse by Allende's victory. For Allende, this represented a serious problem, a threat to the politics of compromise and to the capture of the middle sectors. His early speeches, therefore, returned persistently to two themes: one, the need to raise production and productivity as an urgent priority, and two, the need to restrict workers' and peasants' demands and actions within the limits of bourgeois legality.

It is a challenge to us to accomplish everything in legal terms ... History has broken with past patterns; our revolutionary path is the pluralist path ... It is neither an easy nor a short-term task to build socialism. It is a long and difficult task in which the working class must participate with discipline, organisation, and political responsibility, avoiding, above all, anarchistic decisions, and irresponsible, impulsive acts.³

This was to be a recurrent theme in government statements, growing more insistent as the class struggle developed. The first year (1971) brought a general wage rise of 38 percent for

manual workers and 120 percent for white collar workers, unemployment fell to below 10 percent, 90 factories were nationalised, and 1400 estates (30 percent of Chile's cultivable land) were taken into state ownership. Inflation fell and GDP rose by 8 percent. These early economic advances were not the result of socialist measures, however, but of orthodox Keynesian techniques whereby the state intervened to raise the general level of economic activity. Their initial impact was to raise the living standards of workers, while prices remained for the first time below the level of wage rises. But as was to become clear by the end of the first year, none of these initial actions affected the structure of Chilean capitalism nor represented any serious inroads into the economic power of the Chilean bourgeoisie. The confidence expressed in municipal elections of April 1971, which increased the UP vote, was rapidly to come into question. In May, Allende called in the MIR, a far left organisation which was outside the coalition and was deeply involved in the squatter's movement, for discussions concerning the growing number of occupations of urban and farm land. In June, he moved to restrain 'illegal' occupations, which the Communist Party simultaneously denounced as 'ultra left' provocations. In July, the bill for the

nationalisation of copper received unanimous support in Congress.⁴

It was already clear that the honeymoon period would be brief. The US acted quickly to block economic aid, channelling it instead to right wing parties and the military. And while private capital was enjoying the fruits of the short-term boom, there was significant disinvestment and hoarding of goods, particularly food, to create an economic crisis. During the first year of the Allende government, strikes, land occupations and mobilisations continued. In the face of food shortages, the state created organs of food distribution (the JAPs) to be run by local communities themselves. The shortages were the result of the hoarding of goods by the bourgeoisie, but they waited to take to the streets until the visit of Fidel Castro in November 1971.

He was met by demonstrations of the middle classes waving and banging empty saucepans and complaining of the food shortages for which they were responsible. The fact that many demonstrators brought along their maids and cooks to carry the pots undermined their claims of hardship. At the beginning of 1972 it was not government legislation that shaped the course of events but the

intensification of the class struggle. The previous year had seen 1278 land occupations and 1758 strikes, the highest numbers yet. Radimiro Tomic, the ‘left’ Christian Democrat, complained of

illegal occupations of farms, smallholdings, shanty towns, rented land, commercial offices, factories, mines, schools, colleges, public buildings, roads, and bridges. Illegal occupations are not only the work of the ultra-left; they are also the spontaneous actions of groups of peasants, workers, and miners.⁵

40 In January, the right used their control of Congress to impeach Jose Toha, the Interior Minister. In February they put forward a bill restricting Allende’s right to order nationalisations. In the light of this offensive two alternative strategies emerged within UP – to encourage and strengthen the workers’ own struggles to create extra-parliamentary support for the government (as the left socialists were arguing), or to appeal to the Constitutional Court (as the socialist right, Allende himself and the CP were advocating). At Popular Unity conferences at El Arrayan and Lo Curro, the right wing strategy won hands down. The results were immediate – the pace of nationalisation slowed, talks designed to

agree upon a joint economic strategy with the Christian Democrats began, and Socialist and Communist ministers began to advocate punitive action against workers in struggle. On May 12, for instance, a street demonstration in Concepcion produced clashes. The Communist mayor called in the infamous riot police, *the Grupo Movil*, which Allende had promised to dismantle but could not touch because of the Statute of Guarantees. The Communist Party then denounced the MIR, the Revolutionary Movement of the Left, as ‘ultra left’ for jeopardising further talks with the Christian Democrats.

In keeping with this turn to the right, Pedro Vuskovic, economics minister, a left independent who was closely identified with calls for further nationalisations and thus a particular target for right wing attack was dismissed from the Cabinet. The domination of the press and mass media by the right was guaranteed by the Statute of Guarantees, which ensured that it had the largest audience. The Catholic University channel, *Channel 9*, became the province of a neo fascist priest called Hasbun, whose constant hysterical attacks provoked a series of workers’ occupations. Here, too, the Allende government used the police to ensure the

return of the station to its 'rightful owners'. And a series of minor electoral victories for UP served only to encourage and harden the right within the coalition. The implications of the political line adopted at the UP congresses at El Arrayan and Lo Curro were most clearly illustrated in the government's relationship with the army. While the assault of the right continued in the ideological arena, and in parliament itself, Allende time and again reaffirmed his commitment to the Constitution. At the conference of UNCTAD held in April in Santiago, for example, he protested that.

Little weight has been carried ... by the fact that the nationalisation process, with all its implications and consequences, has been the clearest and most categorical expression of the will of its people, and has been conducted in full accordance with the exact dictates of provisions established in the nation's Constitution.⁶

And in their public declarations, Allende and other UP leaders insisted on the neutrality of the armed forces. As Luis Corvalan, Secretary of the Communist Party, put it, 'the army is not a body alien

to the nation, in the service of anti-national interests', while Allende himself pointed to the 'patriotism of our armed forces, their traditional professionalism, and their submission to the civil authority'.⁷ These declarations were presumably meant to legitimate the increasingly central role the army was coming to play throughout 1972. In March, the visit of General John Ryan of the US Army was followed by an announcement of increased military aid to Chile – the UP government had nothing to say. Instead, it called in the army to control events – first, in December 1971, during the March of the Empty Pots; then, in May 1972, to enforce a ban against a left wing counter demonstration in the city of Concepcion.

Several months earlier, the army had been called to the Chuquicamata copper mine to control a miners' strike. Then, on August 18, 400 armed police invaded the poor working class shanty town of Lo Hermida in Santiago, leaving one person dead, another dying, and an unspecified number injured. Several days later, Allende offered his apologies to the inhabitants – yet at the same time he condemned the activities of the 'ultra left', suggesting an equivalence of the resistance of the poor and the repression by the armed forces. It was a slogan that

42 appeared repeatedly in CP and government publications in the final year of Allende's Presidency. In September, in response to right wing attacks on a radio station in Bio Bio province, Allende declared a state of emergency, thus handing effective control to the police and the army once again. If Lo Hermida had taught Allende nothing, it served to reinforce the fears of the rank and file of the workers' movement. The People's Assembly of Concepcion, held in July and August 1972 with 2,000 delegates attending, called for the formation of a national Popular Assembly (which was actually part of the UP programme), and argued that the struggle for workers' control must be stepped up at all levels. The final item in its closing statement called for the construction of a workers' state. It was clear that the class struggle was intensifying, as October was to prove.

October

Early in October 1972, Allende embarked on a new set of discussions, this time with the judiciary, aimed at 'curbing the violence of left and right'. Then, towards the end of the month, the lorry owners' organisation announced a national strike, ostensibly in protest at the plan to form a national transport system. In a country so

dependent on long haul road transport the implications were very serious. The owners gathered the lorries in car parks on city outskirts, removed key engine parts, and set up armed guards at the gates. The strike was joined by large numbers of shopkeepers, and several professional organisations – of lawyers and doctors – announced their support for the strike. The Christian Democrats refused to discuss the situation with Allende, who was clearly unable to decide what to do. In the event, it was the working class which determined the outcome of events, forming Communal Commands and '*Cordones*', elected committees to run factories together with local communities, and to organise food distribution, and security. The working class took on the lorry owners and the capitalists directly and kept transport functioning. The result was defeat for the ruling class and the right, and a renewed confidence and strength among the workers. Against the lorry owners, led by an extreme right group called Fatherland and Liberty, they had forged new organs of control and had demonstrated where the power in society really lay.

For Allende, however, the central issue was to reimpose state control. Once again, he called in the army to 'restore order' – three generals now joined the

Cabinet.⁸ The key task as he saw it was the return of the factories occupied during the bosses' strike. And this, in turn, demanded the demobilisation of the workers. As far as UP was concerned, the immediate task was to pull back the workers' organisations under the umbrella of the UP parties and the CUT, the trade union confederation dominated by the CP. In the aftermath, the organisations set up by the working class to coordinate their resistance to the right, were attacked as organisations parallel to the CUT. *El Siglo*, the Communist Party newspaper, as well as the Socialist Party, denounced them as anarchist forms of organisation.

The whole Chilean process was documented by the brilliant filmmaker Patricio Guzman in the three chapters of his film 'The *Battle* of Chile'. There is a scene dating from the October period, filmed within the Vicuña McKenna *Cordon* in an industrial area of Santiago. The workers are being addressed by a trade union official from the CUT; their anger is as palpable as the discomfort of the man from the CUT who is trying, and failing, to reimpose the authority of the official unions. For UP, the coming congressional elections of March 1973 would provide an ideal opportunity to channel the energies of the workers into

electoral activity and away from their independent mobilisations. By January 1973, the *Cordones* had been effectively demobilised, though to cover himself Allende responded with some new measures. Simultaneously, the Minister of Economy, Orlando Millas, a CP member who had replaced Vuskovic, proposed the return of 123 occupied factories to their owners, and repeated the accusation that the takeover by the workers during the bosses' strike of the previous October was anarchic and ultra left.

In April the copper miners at the El Teniente mine struck in support of the annual review of their wages and conditions, which the government refused to implement. In reality, Allende was asking them to sacrifice the gains they had won in struggle in order to appease the right and encourage the bourgeoisie to reinvest. When the strike persisted, Allende denounced the miners as 'traitors' and when the miners marched to Santiago, they were greeted by ranks of police who attacked them with tear gas and water cannon. The bitterness and anger of the miners was carefully exploited by the right – fuelling even more the confusions of the left, who also attacked the miners. The MIR, for example, criticised the use of force, but

attacked the miners for “economism”, even though they were fighting to maintain their living standards in an economy that remained capitalist. Yet the miners had not only been the backbone of the working class movement throughout its history; they had also given their support to the UP time and again in the period since 1970.

44 As the March elections approached, the rhetoric of UP appeared to move to the left, proposing a more central role for the CUT and a general wage rise for lower paid workers, though Allende appealed to striking miners to return to work and moderate their wage demand just three weeks later. In the event, UP won the elections with an increased vote (43.4 percent). Yet when a document from MAPU (a constituent organisation of Popular Unity) criticising the government for its concessions to the right emerged a few days later, fifteen members were expelled and the organisation split.

The increased working class vote was an expression of a new confidence and strength gained during the struggles of October. Yet within a month, Allende responded to the increasingly open attacks from the right, and the Christian Democrats in particular, by again attacking the ‘ultra left’ on television.

Street violence increased, yet throughout May and June, Allende focussed on seeking a dialogue with the right, even as the signs of their open mobilisation against him increased.

Counter revolution

The core of the right wing attack was that UP had reduced the country to economic chaos. The shops were empty, the black market was rampant, and inflation was running above 400 percent. Real wages fell in 1973 by around 50 percent.⁹ Clearly, the direct responsibility for the crisis could not be laid at UP’s door. The economic chaos was consciously created by the bourgeoisie, through economic sabotage, the export of capital, and the systematic hoarding of goods. The United States, too, was exercising constant economic pressure by insisting on the repayment of debts while blocking aid to the government. And while welfare payments, and the wages of the poorest had risen during the first two years, inflation ensured that the gains were lost: and the area of the economy under state control was shrinking.

The non-revolutionary left did not contradict the allegation that the independent organisation of workers in these circumstances was anarchic -

instead they echoed these arguments and remained silent when Allende insisted that the UP was a government of the workers that had “conquered a part of power”. A Socialist militant, Pio García, responded to “the simplistic formulation that ‘part of power’ has been won. The bourgeois state (he said) still exists in Chile...The formula ‘dual power’ corresponds to a situation, as in Russia in 1917, when the Soviets and the provisional government confronted one another, when there coexisted two powers which by definition cannot exist within a single state apparatus”.¹⁰ One critical mark of the difference was the attitude of the UP government towards the armed forces, the central column of the bourgeois state.

On June 29, 1973, the tank regiment rolled on to the streets of Santiago and their commander Roberto Souper declared a coup. It was clearly a test of the readiness of the working class to respond, and a rehearsal for what was to come. It served once again to demonstrate the readiness of the working class to take on the bourgeoisie and conduct its own struggle directly. But it also exposed the lack of preparation of the parties of the UP to confront a coup. The response from UP was once again to affirm their confidence in the

constitutionalism of the armed forces. The working-class organisations that had appeared briefly in October 1972 emerged again, though their documents (and above all the newspaper of the joint committee of the *Cordones*, Tarea Urgente) showed a greater political understanding and an even more combative spirit. Once again, the factories were occupied, and distribution controlled directly. And this time the workers’ organisation also began to organise the defence of the factories. This was too much for Allende, who turned again to the army, inviting them to join the Cabinet. They refused. He offered posts to two leading Christian Democrats. They also declined. Yet, despite this refusal, the major government supporters called on the armed forces to take responsibility for the ‘restoration of order’.¹¹ Their message to the workers was work harder, accept more sacrifice, ‘production is also revolution’ and ‘collect signatures against civil war’. As far as Allende saw it, the key task at this point was to remove the historical initiative from the working class and restore it, *by force, if necessary*, to the state. One month later, in August, the military entered the Cabinet of UP for the last time. What changed their mind? Two events; the first was the government’s agreement to implement

the Arms Control Law. Ostensibly passed to deal with the right, the Arms Control Law was administered directly by the armed forces – and was, in the reality of the situation, an invitation to the armed forces to disarm the working class. When the lorry owners embarked on a second national strike on July 26, it was in the knowledge that their chief enemy, the organised working class, was under systematic attack. On August 9, the Financial Times reported:

Availing themselves of powers given them under the arms control law, the armed services set about searching factories and leftist enclaves. These raids, carried out with little delicacy, incurred the wrath of the left. Few arms have apparently been turned up by the searches, and while nests of weapons have been uncovered by the police in the redoubts of wealthy rightists, and the present wave of violence certainly comes from the right, the military's attention has been focussed exclusively on the left.¹²

During these 'arms searches', militants, union activists and members of left parties were tortured and murdered. Allende knew – the left press contained

literally hundreds of stories of what was happening; the Socialist Party Journal, *Chile Hoy*, carried dramatic photographs and eyewitness reports. But Allende and his government did nothing. They could not hear the message coming from one worker at the Vicuna McKenna Cordon:

... what we want is a revolution, we don't want reformism, we want people's power once and for all in Chile. We don't want generals in the new Cabinet because we think they want to stop the revolution.¹³

The signs of what was to come were impossible to ignore. In July, *Chile Hoy* published a debate between members of the right on whether a 'soft' (economic) or a 'hard' (military) coup was preferable. A group of sailors wrote to Allende warning that military preparations were already under way in the Navy. Allende called on the naval command to deal with it! Pinochet, who had been given the public order responsibility in the Cabinet, was already ordering attacks on trade unions and political parties. Allende had insisted that Carlos Prats, the commander in chief and a socialist, was a constitutionalist. Prats resigned and recommended Pinochet for his post and then left the country. His

loyalty, it appeared, was to the army and not the constitution. On August 9 General Ruiz, the transport minister, called openly for a coup. On September 4, a huge demonstration marched through the streets of Santiago on the anniversary of Allende's election. One observer described the muted and demoralised atmosphere, so different from the September day in 1970 when Allende was elected.¹⁴ Seven days later the coup was announced; but the persecution of trade unionists and militants, the occupation of union and party headquarters, the arrests and the torture had started weeks before. The most striking thing was that despite declarations to the contrary, the organisations of Popular Unity were completely unprepared.

The aftermath

In the days that followed, the sinister Caravan of Death passed through the country taking socialists, activists and trade unionists to the torture centres and concentration camps around the country. We now know that at least 6300 people were murdered during and after the coup. Thousands were imprisoned and tortured. The reaction internationally was immediate as solidarity campaigns began to make known that this experiment in democracy in a bourgeois democracy had

been drowned in blood. The debates on the left were intense. Inevitably the whole thing was explained as a CIA operation or the work of psychopaths in uniform. Both were almost certainly true, but the explanation had already been given in a ludicrous speech in May 1971 by Carlos Altamirano, the general secretary of Allende's Socialist Party

Armed confrontation between classes is inevitable ... Reaction will again knock at the barracks door. Lenin's words are pertinent to our situation: 'It seems impossible to fight against a modern army; the army has to become revolutionary ...' In reality, the indecision of the troops, inevitable in any truly popular movement, leads to a real struggle for the army as the revolutionary struggle intensifies.¹⁵

Altamirano seems to be arguing that the workers in uniform should take on the officers. It is an absurd position. Workers will fight when the class is organised and ready to respond. Some soldiers did respond in Chile – and they were immediately shot. Without political leadership, rank and file soldiers cannot take on the struggle themselves.¹⁶ In the days after the coup, there was a persistent

rumour that Prats had prepared for a military response and would defend the constitution. As we have seen, when he had the opportunity, he resigned and passed his post to Pinochet. It was bourgeois democracy that both men were prepared to defend, not the interests of the working class. Many comrades were persuaded that the factories had stocks of arms in preparation. But at one of the better organised factories one militant complained that.

When we got there (the Indumetal factory) the workers had already occupied the factory with the most rudimentary weapons. We gave out AMK guns and showed them how to use them. We had some bazookas and some machine guns. The most disturbing factor, though, was the lack of any specific plan, any direction and especially the lack of contact and coordination with other places where there was resistance. We'd no idea what was going on outside the factory".¹⁷

In fact, they were among the very few whose small stocks of arms had not been confiscated in previous weeks by the military. The general picture was one of confusion, impotence, and isolation; the

working class was left to take the brunt of a coup that, by 1974, had murdered 6300 of their number. The Chilean Road to socialism, it appeared, only followed the parliamentary route: there was no strategy for the intensification of the class struggle across society.

Allende's election was celebrated by reformism as evidence that socialism could come through parliamentary change, that class confrontation could be avoided. The actions of UP were directed at winning the right to compromise. Chile tells it very differently. Reformism absorbs the left into the delusion that the ruling class in a capitalist society will concede power. Chile is the evidence that when its power is challenged by a working class prepared to act in its own interests to emancipate itself through its own actions, as Marx put it, then the ruling class will act with the maximum savagery in defence of its interests. The rules will cease to apply.

When the coup took place, no appeal to law, constitution or human rights was worth a candle when the interests of the powerful were at risk. And in Chile they were genuinely at risk. The working class had begun to act collectively in its class interests and to discover its own potential. For the Chilean bourgeoisie

that was their worst nightmare, and they acted with maximum savagery in response. The reality is that global capitalism had a different plan. Neo-liberalism was its vision of the future, but its implementation required the demobilisation of the workers movement, the destruction of its capacity to fight back. And the terrible irony of Chile is that it was a government claiming to be socialist that deployed those weapons against its base in the working class. In the months after the coup, the communist and social democratic parties around the world met to draw their conclusions from Chile. Enrico Berlinguer, general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, put it this way.

We must work to constantly increase the weight and ensure the eventual predominance of those tendencies that, with a sense of historical and political realism, recognise the necessity and maturity of a constructive dialogue and agreement among all the popular forces ... we are the first to realise that the march towards this prospect is not easy and cannot be hurried. But neither must we think that the time at our disposal is infinite ... the necessity to open at long last a sure road of economic development, social renewal, and

democratic progress ... make it increasingly urgent and pressing to arrive at what we call the great new 'historical compromise'.¹⁸

Berlinguer's historic compromise is the abandonment of socialism itself. For revolutionary socialists, however, the lesson of Chile is to remember that socialism is the self-emancipation of the working class, and that Chile is evidence of their capacity to create in their struggles the instruments of their liberation. Allende's last speech before his death at the hands of those who organised the military coup was moving. Allende argued, "The people must defend themselves, but they must not sacrifice themselves. The people must not let themselves be destroyed or riddled with bullets, but they cannot be humiliated either".¹⁹ Yet he headed a state which had denounced its self-defence as anarchic and compromised with its class enemies. In the end it was an admission of defeat. Yet the Chilean October, despite its terrible human cost, was the legacy it left for the international revolutionary movement.

Endnotes

¹ It was no coincidence that the head of the FBI and the Secretary of State at the time were respectively the brothers Allen and John Foster Dulles, both directors of United Fruit.

² The full UP programme is in Ann Zammit (ed) 1973. *The Chilean Road to Socialism*, Brighton; and Salvadore Allende 1973. *Chile's road to socialism*, London, pp. 23–51.

³ Salvador Allende. 1973. *Chile's road to socialism*. London. p.139.

⁴ Why should the National Party and the Christian Democrats support the nationalisation of copper? Most importantly, because it was the *quid pro quo* for the *Statute of Guarantees*; because their forces were still in slight disarray, and they were anxious not to discredit themselves; and the Christian Democrats could hardly oppose a measure they themselves had set in motion.

⁵ *Morning Star*, 7 August 1972.

⁶ Allende: op. cit., pp. 192,3.

⁷ Allende in op. cit., p. 141.

⁸ The only public repudiation of the move came from the Christian Left, who resigned from the Cabinet.

⁹For a detailed account of the economic situation see Phil O'Brien et al. 1977. *Chile, State and Revolution*. London chapter 6, pp. 123–160.

¹⁰ Gabriel Smirnow. 1974. *The Revolution Disarmed: Chile 1970–73*, London, p. 103.

¹¹ See the speech by Luis Corvalan, in *Marxism Today*, September 1973.

¹² Mike Gonzalez. 1984. The Left and the coup in Chile. *International Socialism* 2:22 pp,45-86.

¹³ *Chile Hoy*, August 1973, quoted in Phil O'Brien *et al.*, 1977, pp. 180–181.

¹⁴ See Helios Prieto. *The gorillas are amongst us*. London 1974. The march was filmed by Patricio Guzman and included in “The battle of Chile part 1”. The atmosphere on the march is muted, the faces of the marchers demoralised.

¹⁵ Gabriel Smirnow, op. cit., pp. 14–15.

¹⁶ This issue is discussed in Mike Gonzalez and Houman Barekat (eds) *Arms and the people* London, 2013.

¹⁷ Quoted in, Chile trade unions and the resistance, *Chile Fights* 11, p. 3.

¹⁸ Enrico Berlinguer. 1974. Reflections on the events in Chile, *Marxism Today*, February, p. 50.

¹⁹ Salvadore Allende, Last Words to the Nation, @ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/allende/1973/september/11.htm>

Family Values: Capitalism, Marxism and Women's Oppression

Sinéad Kennedy

The opening sentence of Leo Tolstoy's famous 1878 novel, *Anna Karenina*, declares what while "[a]ll happy families resemble one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way".¹ In *Anna Karenina* the greatest factor in determining happiness is loving 'correctly'. For Tolstoy, appropriate love is, familial love, linked in the novel to nature, spirituality, and childhood, experienced within the traditional family structure and centred on the continuation of the family unit. While 'unhappy families' undoubtedly provided Tolstoy with the narrative grit required to sustain his 800 page novel, he shows little interest in the invisible substructures that sustain this 'happy family' he cherishes so dearly. For the feminist writer Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018), it was the reverse of Tolstoy's dictum that reveals a more profound truth about the family under capitalism. Those who speak of stable, 'happy families', Le Guin suggests, conveniently ignore the 'substructure of sacrifices, repressions, suppressions, choices made or forgone, chances taken or lost, balancing of greater and lesser evils' that create the foundation of familial happiness.² This is not wilful ignorance; it is rooted in structures that mean women often make more sacrifices, harder 'choices', in the interests of the wider unit. The happiness of men and children often comes at the expense of women, and as Sophie Lewis notes, the attendant unhappiness can feel unique, but only because its structural quality, like the structure of capitalism, is obscured from view.³

The Irish State

In Ireland, 'the Family' enjoys a particularly central and privileged position within the state. Its defining legal document, the 1937 Constitution is deeply conservative and gendered, promoting the institutions of marriage and the family and elevating to an ideal, the 'special' role of women within the private home. The 1937 Constitution was the culmination of a deeply conservative political project, revealing a state that was willing to show extreme deference to Catholic teaching, while ensuring that its formal and constitutional structures were always steadfastly liberal democratic. It would make concessions to Catholicism in terms of its willingness to incorporate aspects of Catholic social teaching – Articles 40 and 41 for example – but they would always be subject to the regulating articles on property and capital. In other words, the post-independent elite was committed to creating a state that was both Catholic *and* capitalist, with the capitalist part too often being overlooked.

The Free State emerged from the detritus of the War of Independence against Britain and a short, but vicious, post-colonial civil war. Almost immediately it adopted Catholicism as one of its principle regulating ideologies, to perform a number of functions: firstly the Catholic Church conferred legitimacy upon the fledgling post-colonial state,

and secured the delivery of ideologically driven education, health, and welfare systems. In this way, the post-colonial state could disassociate itself from revolutionary struggles that included significant socialist and feminist movements.⁴ Central to this task was a deliberative and systematic attempt by the new state to limit the citizenship rights of Irish women between 1922 and 1937. Examples include the 1927 Juries Act, which exempted women from jury service; the 1930s marriage bar for women teachers and civil servants; and the 1936 Conditions of Employment Act which sought to limit the number of women employed in any given industry. This stripping away of women's rights was legitimised in terms of the family and traditional gender roles: if women 'naturally' belonged in the home with their families, then their opportunities to a life outside the home could legitimately be limited. For the newly formed state, born out of counterrevolutionary struggle, the regulation and control of women, created a sense of social stability for a country in flux. Regulating women's bodies and their sexuality was about more than marginalising women, it was central to the hegemony of the newly empowered Catholic middle classes, who emerged as the bearers of conservative stability as Catholic morality was extended and reinforced.⁵ We now know that this vision of the stable traditional family so cherished by Catholic Ireland

rested upon a particularly brutal system of containment where women and their children were considered ‘little more than a commodity for trade amongst religious orders’ with the knowledge and complicity of the State.⁶

These ideas were given formal and legal expression in the 1937 Constitution; a deeply conservative and gendered document that promoted the institutions of marriage and the family and where the ‘special’ role of women within the private home was elevated as an ideal. The document was produced through an intimate collaboration between the Catholic Church and the political establishment and authored by Ireland’s founding patriarchs Eamon de Valera and Archbishop John Charles McQuaid. Ireland’s patriarchal history and cultural narrative were intimately woven into the document’s narrative where the role of the family and the trope of woman as (m)other were both central.

Reflecting core Catholic social teaching, Article 41 recognises ‘the Family’ as ‘the natural primary and fundamental unit’ in society and ‘guarantees’ to protect its ‘authority, as the necessary basis of social order’. The family imagined in these articles is highly gendered where the ‘special’ role of women within the private home is elevated as an ideal. By defining women’s role in the state as a private one, situated within the family, reinforced by legal prohibitions on

divorce, abortion and contraception, the implication was clear: in this newly independent nation state, women’s function would be to (re)produce the bodies of the next generation of the family, and by extension to (re)produce the body politic, the nation itself. Women activists at the time were quick to spot the dangers inherent in Article 41 although there were divisions between middle and working class activists about the nature of the concerns expressed. Louie Bennett of the Irish Women’s Workers’ Union argued the phrase ‘life within the home’ should be replaced by ‘work for the home’, arguing that doing so would limit the risk of women being restricted to unpaid work at home and provide better labour protections for those who worked for wages.⁷

The Women Graduates’ Association focused on questions of autonomy, arguing that decisions about who went out to work should be left to the family without any interference by the State. De Valera refused to budge, and the 1937 Constitution was passed with article 41 intact. Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington concluded that the Irish Constitution was based on a ‘Fascist model, in which women would be relegated to permanent inferiority’.⁸

The consequences of Article 41 for women went beyond questions of employment and marginalisation. The elevation of the family ideologically

54 within the Constitution meant that even on occasions where the state sought to develop and extend state social service provision they were met with opposition. The infamous ‘Mother and Child Scheme’ introduced by Minister for Health, Dr Noel Browne, in the early 1950s, is particularly noteworthy in this regard. Browne’s bill would have introduced a new health care scheme for women and children which would have included free medical care for all mothers and their children up to the age of 16, regardless of income. The Irish bishops objected on the basis that it represented state interference in the private domain of the family. Another key concern of the Catholic hierarchy, although never explicitly stated was their fear that doctors would provide sexual education under the guise of gynaecological advice to their female patients including advice on family planning. As the Bishop of Fears stated,

Education in regard to motherhood includes instruction in regard to sex relations, chastity, and marriage. The State has no competence to give instructions in such matters. We regard with the greatest apprehension the proposal to give to local medical officers the right to tell Catholic girls and women how they should behave in regard to this sphere of conduct at once so delicate and sacred.⁹

Faced with opposition from elements of the Catholic educated medical professions and the church hierarchy the Government backed down, the scheme was defeated, and Browne resigned. The defeat of the ‘Mother and Child Scheme’ demonstrated that the regulation of female sexuality was a key strategy in maintaining the Church’s control over reproduction and the integrity of the family in its traditional form.

Oppression in the modern family

Today’s families are very different from those that de Valera and McQuaid set out to control. The Catholic church no longer dominates, while in almost every industrialised country, the traditional male-breadwinner family model has been replaced with the two-income family model with both members working outside the home. This has not produced greater equality for women, however. Instead, it has created a whole new set of burdens. The modern woman is supposed to be some kind of superwoman who has a successful career, happy well cared for children and a sexually satisfied partner. For working class women this creates a double burden, in which they return from work at the end of the day only to face all of their family responsibilities. Unlike wealthy women who can afford to pay for someone to take primary responsibility for childcare and domestic

work, working class women are expected to work outside the home and care for their children. In order to understand why this is the case, we need to recognise the vital economic and ideological role that the family continues to play for modern capitalism. Economically, the family is the site where the next generation of workers are fed, clothed, socialised, educated, loved, and cared for, to ensure that they turn into the next generation of workers. At the same time, the family is also an important unit of consumption.

Fewer and fewer families in Ireland today resemble the typical family envisaged in 1937. Indeed, the way the majority experience ‘family’ life today would have been unimaginable to Eamon de Valera and Archbishop McQuaid. Women are more than a decade older when they have their first child; they have fewer children; they are often in a relationship but not necessarily married when they have a child; increasing numbers actively choose not to have children and a significant number of families have one lone parent, usually a woman. Furthermore, the constitutional definition of ‘the Family’ itself has been widened to include same-sex relationships. However, it would be a mistake to think that the contemporary capitalist state is any less invested in the value of the family than in the past. So while traditional ideas about the family no longer reflect the reality of society

today, the family has proved to be remarkably resilient surviving as a dominant social structure, despite the profound changes in how we live and work. This should be less surprising to us than it is, because as Sophie Lewis argues, family values are bourgeois economics writ small.¹⁰

Neoliberalism is not just an ideological project; its principle objective is to reorder economic relations and restore the balance between labour and capital, in favour of capitalism. One of the ways this is achieved, is through the destruction of social capital. Increasingly, more and more responsibility is placed onto individual families as basic social protections and the welfare state is slowly dismantled. Healthcare and education, once provided by the state, are being turned into commodities, privatised and the cost is passed onto individual families. These attacks have a disproportionate effect on women. The ideology of the family continues to be supported even in ways that are contradictory to the needs of capital itself. Women’s paid employment is vital to capitalism, so it is not in the interests of the ruling class to see women return to the home although they do want women to understand that their primary responsibility is for unpaid family care.

In her highly influential book *Family Values* (2017), Melinda Cooper argues that from the 1970s onwards,

neoliberalism has essentially reinvented the welfare state by rendering family instead of society responsible for the poor. Cooper challenges the idea that neoliberal capital privileges atomised individualism over family solidarity. Instead, she argues that the liberal ethos of personal responsibility was always supported by the wider imperative of family responsibility. In practice this works by extending the poor law tradition into its contemporary form; household debt.¹¹

Gender and class

The family has always been central to the Marxist understanding of gender oppression under capitalism. In their early writings, Marx and Engels trace the origin of the history of property relations to the patriarchal family, where ‘the wife and children are the slaves of the husband’. They continue; ‘This latent slavery in the family though still very crude is the first property but even at this early stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists who call it the power of disposing of the labour power of others.’¹² While Marx himself never wrote a systematic account of the origins of women’s devalued position in class society and his position was never fully developed, after his death, Engels used his notebooks to explain how the state developed to protect private property through the creation of the patriarchal family. There has long been a

tendency among activists and writers to accuse Marxism of economic reductionism when it comes to discussions of race, gender, and sexuality, of reducing all social questions, including women’s oppression, to class relations. For example, even Heidi Hartmann, a feminist broadly sympathetic to Marxism famously concluded that “attempts to integrate Marxism and feminism are unsatisfactory to us as feminists because they subsume the feminist struggle into the 'larger' struggle against capital. To continue our simile further, either we need a healthier marriage, or we need a divorce”.¹³

With the increasing influence across the left of what is termed ‘identity politics’ these accusations have intensified, but usually rest on the false assumption that Marxism subordinates’ women’s oppression and other oppressions around race and LGBTQI to the more important arena of the class struggle, or worse, ignores oppression altogether. One of the reasons for this, Eleanor Leacock points out, is that ‘[i]n western academic circles second-hand knowledge of (or assumptions about) Marxist ideas are legion, but Marx’s and Engels’ works are all too seldom read. The usual practice is to set up Marxist theory as the straw man of economic determinism and then to knock it down.’¹⁴ Marxist theory does place a great deal of emphasis on economic relations, but this does not

prevent Marxists from treating questions of women's oppression with the upmost seriousness or playing a leading role in the fight against oppression in all its forms.

The Marxist approach to oppression seeks to illustrate how the origins of oppression are rooted in class society; this is not the same thing as reducing oppression to class. Marxism is based on an understanding that it is the material world that shapes the ideas in our heads, not the other way round. Therefore any understanding of women's oppression must be rooted concretely in a historical analysis of particular societies, not in sweeping generalisations about human nature. Capitalism is the prism through which all of our sexual relations are currently distorted, and this means that Marxists share with feminists a deep loathing of misogyny, arguing that women have yet to achieve genuine liberation. Marx and Engels' thinking on these questions was developed and refined over several decades. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), they were clear that the 'traditional' patriarchal family is a structure predicated on the oppression of women, and that its ending is necessary for women's emancipation. They note: "Differences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class. All are instruments of labour more or less expensive to use, according to their age

and sex'.¹⁵ As China Miéville notes in his superb study of the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels are here implicitly acknowledging how capitalism uses 'sexist norms' to lower the cost of labour power by employing women while simultaneously using their labour to maintain downward competition on the rates for male workers, although the insight is not yet fully developed in terms of a more systematic analysis of capitalism.¹⁶ The *Manifesto* doesn't neglect women's oppression in the family either, nor women's exploitation, nor their specific role as women workers. With the overturning of capitalism, Marx and Engels argue, the bourgeois family will be swept away, ending the oppression of women, as women, within its structures. Yet they are also clear that it is as workers that women can most effectively effect change and liberate all of humanity.

In 1884, Engels published *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. It is broadly understood as one of the fundamental texts within the Marxist tradition on the question of women's oppression. It was written after Marx's death, but Engels drew heavily on Marx's detailed notes along with his own to develop his argument. More recent scholars like Heather Brown have highlighted some important differences between Marx's notes and Engels's *Origins* that point to some differences in

perspective. However, the broad themes of their analysis are similar.¹⁷ Engels argues that the male dominated family has historical roots that can be located in the emergence of class society during the transition from nomad hunter/gather societies to more permanent settled agricultural societies. This transition saw the emergence of private property and with it the rise of class society. The family became institutionalised as a means of protecting property and wealth and ensuring that they were passed from father to son. The only way a man could know if a child was his offspring was for women's sexuality to be tethered to his own, with women's chastity emerging as a key factor in class relations. Women during this period began to be reconceived as the property of their husbands. Far from being an unchanging feature of human biology or an unchanging idea in people's heads, women's oppression, Engels argues, arose with the emergence of class societies:

The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage was a great step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it

opens the period that has lasted until today in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others.¹⁸

Women's oppression cannot be understood as something separate from capitalism, rather it plays a central role in its perpetuation. Capitalism relies on the central role that women have in the 'private' family as it is here that the next generation of workers are cared for. Engels' work has been subjected to a broad range of criticism and it is not without its problems. Some critics argue that Marxism cannot explain the more personal aspects of women's oppression because it locates the root of women's oppression in class society. Certainly, Marxists stress the economic roots of inequality precisely because we seek to understand how seemingly different forms of oppression have come to play a crucial, and often interdependent role in maintaining a system of exploitation. Yet, more work needs to be done to understand why men without property, without a stake in the system continue to abuse and demean women, especially if we are to develop a unitary theory of gender and oppression. Heather Brown, who has done important work on Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*, points to Engels lack of nuance and lack of fidelity to Marx's notebooks. She argues that in

contrast to Engels, Marx treats the working class as a more diverse political subject, including women, who were considered to be revolutionary political subjects.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the essence of Engels' analysis of women's oppression remains important; the source of women's oppression is located in their role within the family and in the family's role as an economic unit within bourgeois society. This subordinate role in the family is connected to other facets of women's oppression in society at large. The other significant contribution that Marxism makes to an understanding of the family and gender oppression is around the question of reproduction.

Reproduction is typically conflated with childbirth and childcare. Marxism acknowledges and reimagines the interconnectedness of production (the act of creation) and reproduction (the act of creating again).²⁰ In *Capital*, Marx understands reproduction as the reinvesting of some of the products of accumulation into maintaining the means and forces of production. Without reproduction capitalist society could not reproduce itself. In the factory, degraded machines need replacing over time; so too in the life of workers, who must spend their wages in order to feed and clothe themselves and care for the children, who in their turn, become the next generation of workers. Marx writes:

'If production be capitalistic in form, so too will be reproduction'.²¹

This is, as Susan Ferguson argues, a necessary and a contradictory process: 'It is *necessary* because capitalists need human labour power, an essential condition of value production which they do not produce themselves. And workers ... of course, need the wages and social services through which they can meet their basic ... needs.' It is also *contradictory* because capitalists must create conditions 'whereby meeting human needs is subordinated' to profit, requiring the constraint and control of 'wages and social spending that pay for the renewal of the workforce, and of life itself'.²² Capitalism relieves some of the tensions by ensuring that most of this 'reproductive' work is gendered and done for free, within the structures of the family.

Thinking about capitalism in what has become known as social reproduction theory allows us to recalibrate the relationship between gender and class. That said, social reproduction theory is now a broad church, frequently divorced from its Marxist origins. Too often it appears as a sort of shorthand, cataloguing practices and institutions and is used to describe, rather than to explain or analyse gender and its relationship to capital. At its best, however, it can help us better understand not just gender and

the family, but also race, colonialism, sexuality and other oppressions that are implicated in the necessary but contradictory relationship with capitalism.

Gender and oppression today

Let us return now to the question of gender and Irish society. One of the challenges in understanding the oppression of women and the role of the family in Irish society is that too often women are treated as a monolith group, with little attention paid to questions around class. For example, the current debate around Article 41.2 of the Constitution or the ‘Women in the Home’ article as it is known, is as much defined by class today as it was in the 1930s. There is a tendency today among feminists to emphasise discriminatory practices like the Marriage Bar which from the late 1920s until 1973 required women in certain public service jobs to leave upon marriage. The image that is conjured up is too often, as Heather Laird and Emma Penney argue, ‘of a frustrated middle-class woman forced to stay at home rather than engage in validating work outside the house’.²³ Yet this is only one aspect of the experience of women who are mothers and work outside the home; the story also includes a long history of working class mothers who had little or no choice but to combine motherhood and paid labour.

A key reason for this, is that, in general, women’s paid work is assigned a distinctly marginal role in Irish labour history, even in celebrated accounts such as Peter Berresford Ellis’s *A History of the Irish Working Class*. Ellis’s book is largely an account of working class men in the partially-industrialised Ireland of the 19th and early 20th centuries.²⁴ However, unlike Britain, in Ireland it was service jobs rather than production jobs that constituted the majority of working class jobs and central to this was the paid household labour provided by women, both married and single.²⁵ For example, the 1911 census indicates that 93 percent of Irish indoor servants were women.²⁶

While women’s participation in the paid workforce declined after 1922, the demand for paid household labour continued. Historian Maria Luddy’s work shows how domestic service remained ‘the largest single source of female employment until the 1950s’ in the south of Ireland.²⁷ Simply focusing on the impact of Article 41.2 on middle class mothers who were denied equal access to the workplace also ignores how the Irish State failed to provide any support for working class women who wished to stay at home. Article 41 of the Constitution understood the man as head of a gendered household that conceived of women and children as male dependents.

It was around this idea of women as dependents that the gendered welfare system was constructed, relieving the state of the responsibility of providing adequate support for women and children well into the 1990s. Historian Mary Daly estimates that approximately 125,000 women were in dependent relationships with men in 1987, but because of the way poverty is measured, she notes, ‘we do not know precisely how many men fail to hand over sufficient money in the home.’²⁸ What we can assume is that for every man that failed to hand over money, there was a woman either forced to work outside the home or to navigate a social welfare system that only recognised her as a dependent. In this context, the State’s conception of women and the family can be viewed as a constitutional clause which prevented some women from rejecting low wage and exploitative jobs with working class women experiencing the consequences of this gendered inequality far more severely than middle class women.

Article 41 ‘The Family’ in the Irish Constitution, sub-section two, focuses on the question of care work in the family. Arguably it could be understood to represent a constitutional affirmation of the public and essential good that care work provides to the State, largely by women within the family unit. Yet, in practice, it has never amounted to anything more than rhetoric providing

no material benefit to women who do work exclusively in the home. Social issues for the Irish state have always found themselves subject to constraints of liberal individualism and the protection of private property. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the Irish courts have always been allergic to the idea that the 1937 Constitution should be interpreted as having a social dimension. For example, Supreme Court Justices have consistently found that the individual property rights of the owning spouse (husband), are protected by Article 43 of the Constitution, and are not capable of being eclipsed by the States’ obligation to protect the elevated position of the family and women/mother’s in the home in Article 41, once again demonstrating the traditional and standard antipathy shown towards the contributions of female homemakers in Ireland. Nor has the Supreme Court ever interpreted Article 41 as imposing additional financial obligations on the State to support mothers in the home given the tax and social welfare impacts on public expenditure. For example, in the 1992 Supreme Court Case, *L v L*, the Court rejected an argument grounded in Article 41.2 to support a married women’s claim to a 50 per cent share in the family home on the basis that Article 41.2 did not give the Courts jurisdiction to make a transfer of property in favour of a mother. Furthermore, when the Supreme

62 Court thinks about ‘The Family’ it only ever interprets Article 41 as a family founded in marriage (after 2015 to include same-sex couples). Yet, one in five people in Ireland live in a one parent family and one in four families with children is a one parent family.²⁹ While legislation and public policy may recognise broader definitions of the family, like for example, the provision for one parent families in the social welfare code, only one type of family enjoys constitutional protection. This has real-life implications for many. Consider, for example, the case of John O’Meara from Co Tipperary. His long term partner and mother of his children died tragically in early 2021 but because they were not married his relationship was not recognised by the State and he was denied a Survivors Pension.³⁰ At the same time, the State routinely recognises co-habitation, but for the purpose of depriving people of benefits in the social welfare code. The system of social welfare inspection leaves women in receipt of single parent payments vulnerable to abuse of power, with many reporting unannounced visits and searches of personal possessions. Women who attempt to challenge the abuse of power by these inspectors, who are often men, are threatened with having their payments stopped.³¹

The essential nature of unpaid labour within the home, the majority of which is

performed by women was thrown into sharp relief by the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet women’s experiences were, at best, forced to the margins of the public debate and, at worst, rendered completely invisible. Covid-19 disproportionately impacted the lives of working class people in general, but it was women who found themselves at the coalface. Research conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) found that the pandemic had a “disproportionate impact” on women and that it was undoing many of the gains of workplace equality achieved in recent decades and exacerbating disparities: “Previous crises have shown that when women lose their jobs, their engagement in unpaid care work increases and that when jobs are scarce, women are often denied job opportunities available to men”.³² Furthermore, it found that women’s jobs were 1.8 times more vulnerable to the Covid-19 crisis than men’s, with women accounting for 54 percent of overall job losses though they account for just 39 percent of global employment.³³ In Ireland women exited the workforce at a faster rate than men and carried a heavier share of the unpaid care and domestic work. According to research by the UN titled ‘Women Before COVID-19 Hit’, women on average spent six more hours than men on unpaid childcare every week. A survey of nearly 1500 women by the National Women’s Council in May 2020 revealed that some

85 percent of women believed their caring responsibilities had increased dramatically since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting they were unfairly shouldering the burden of unpaid work.³⁴ This is confirmed by recently published research by the ESRI which shows that since COVID-19, women now spend 31.5 hours per week more on unpaid childcare than men. This ‘second shift’ equates to almost an extra full-time job.³⁵

One of the most concerning features of the COVID-19 pandemic was the horrifying global surge in domestic violence which the UN has referred to as “the Shadow Pandemic” revealing something important about the nature of the family under capitalism.³⁶ We cannot simply reduce the family to the key political and economic unit of capitalism. For many people, the family can be the one place we receive unconditional love and support - a haven from a sometimes brutal world. However, this experience is far from universal as the family can also be a site of much unhappiness, pain, and violence. Domestic violence accounts for a significant portion of recorded violent crime in Ireland and the most common scene of murder is the home. In 2022, 12 women died in violent circumstances in Ireland, making it the worst year in a decade for violence against women. Between 1996 and April 2023, a total of 258 women died violently in Ireland. The

statistics show that 165 of these women had been killed in their own homes.³⁷ Women who are raped are also more likely to be attacked by someone they know – often within the home. In Ireland, 1 in every 6 women over the age of 15 have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner.³⁸ The physical and sexual abuse of children is also more likely to happen inside the home than outside. None of this should be particularly surprising as the family is an institution based on hierarchical relationships and sexual repression. The family promises happiness and safety, but frequently it delivers insecurity and sadness. While it can sometimes function as a haven from the cruelty of the outside world, it cannot be a genuinely secure retreat. Pressures on the family, particularly working class families, from unpaid bills to unemployment, from problems of parents working shifts to difficult relationships, all impinge upon it and have been exacerbated in recent years by neoliberalism. In their manifesto for 21st century feminism, *Feminism for the 99 percent*, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser point towards the catastrophic effects that neoliberal privatisation and the deregulation of welfare and care services have had on individual families. ‘In some cases,’ they argue, ‘it has marketised public services, turning them into direct profit streams: in others, it has shunted them back to individual families, forcing

them – and especially the women within them – to bear the entire burden of care.’³⁹

If the family is supposed to be a *haven in a heartless world*, we should begin by asking what kind of world would be so heartless as to require it? What kind of world would render such an institution irrelevant? How do we achieve a different world? As Marxists, we understand that this involves an organised and global struggle against capitalism to create a world that puts people, not profit, at its heart. To help us achieve this we need to better develop our understanding of how our world operates under capitalism, in other words, a theory of capitalism and resistance to help us win. This requires Marxist political economy capable of integrating an analysis of reproduction within an analysis of economic production. If we want to understand the position of women under capitalism, we need to understand political economy, but if we want to understand political economy, we need to analyse the position of women under capitalism. This is not simply a case of adding gender and stirring the mix. It means creating a form of Marxism that does more than simply make space for an analysis of race and gender; rather it needs to analyse how race and gender affect the outcome of production under capitalism.

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In the AI of the Beholder:

Artificial Intelligence in its Capitalist Context

Memet Uludağ

There are many readily available definitions of Artificial Intelligence (AI). A simple Google search will provide endless results ranging from the deeply technical and scientific, to descriptions in more understandable language. From TV ads to academia, AI has suddenly become a major talking point. Since the launch of OpenAI's ChatGPT or Google's Bard, it has also taken the world of popular culture by storm. But AI is not new. The concept, science and technology of AI have been evolving since the 1950s. Hollywood movies have played their part in popularising the '*fantastic*' world of AI, as has the mainstream media.

This article looks at the historical context around technological advancement and tries to take stock of some of the hype around it. Will Artificial Intelligence be the game changer it is being heralded as? To what extent will it change our societies? How will it affect workers and work practices? How will it affect people's lives? None of these questions can be answered definitively, of course, but with so much written on the subject, this article is meant to give readers an introduction to AI in its essentials.

The Marxist Lens

From a Marxist perspective, AI represents a complex and multifaceted development in the realm of technology and capitalism. Marxism is a socio-economic and political theory that emphasises the role of class struggle and the dynamics of capitalism in shaping society. When examining AI through this lens, several key considerations come to the forefront.

Marxists argue that AI, as a product of advanced capitalism, is fundamentally shaped by the profit motive and the pursuit of capital accumulation. The development and deployment of AI technologies are primarily driven by the capitalist class, who seek to increase productivity, reduce labour costs, and expand their control over the means of production. In this context, AI can be seen as a tool that reinforces and exacerbates existing class divisions, as those who own and control the technology benefit disproportionately from its advancements.

Furthermore, Marxists contend that AI has the potential to disrupt labour markets and lead to the displacement of human workers, particularly in industries where automation can replace human tasks. This can result in mass unemployment, economic inequality, and the exploitation of labour, as workers are forced to adapt to precarious and low paying jobs, or face joblessness in the face of technological advancements.

From a Marxist perspective, the benefits of AI are often concentrated in the hands of the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) while the working class may experience further alienation and exploitation. Therefore, the development and application of AI technology should be viewed through a critical lens, with an emphasis on addressing the social and economic

implications of AI in the context of class struggle.

In summary, AI, when analysed from a Marxist perspective, is seen as a product of capitalist dynamics, which can exacerbate class divisions, economic inequality, and the exploitation of labour. A Marxist analysis of AI underscores the importance of considering its societal impact and how it can be harnessed for the benefit of the broader working class rather than serving the interests of the capitalist elite.

The Capitalist Lens

From a capitalist perspective, AI is regarded as a groundbreaking and transformative force that drives economic growth, innovation, and prosperity. Capitalism is an economic and political system that places a strong emphasis on private ownership, competition, and the pursuit of profit. When examining AI through this lens, several key considerations emerge.

Capitalists view AI as a catalyst for efficiency and productivity. AI technologies can automate repetitive tasks, enhance decision making processes, and optimise resource allocation, which, in turn, can lead to higher profitability for businesses. The ability of AI to process vast amounts of data and provide valuable insights is seen

as a strategic advantage that allows companies to gain a competitive edge in the global marketplace.

Moreover, AI is seen as a tool for job creation rather than solely displacement. Capitalists argue that while certain manual and routine jobs may be automated, AI also creates new opportunities for highly skilled workers in AI development, data analysis, and related fields. This, they contend, can lead to overall economic growth, offering a chance for individuals to upskill and adapt to the changing job landscape.

From a capitalist perspective, AI innovation is encouraged and driven by the profit motive, competition, and market forces. The incentives for companies to invest in AI research and development are rooted in the potential for significant financial returns and the ability to meet consumer demands with cutting edge products and services. This perspective emphasises the importance of fostering a business friendly environment that enables companies to invest in AI technology without excessive regulation or obstacles.

In summary, AI, when analysed from a capitalist perspective, is seen as a driver of economic growth, innovation, and job creation. It is viewed as a powerful tool for enhancing productivity and competitiveness in a global market, with

a strong focus on the profit motive and private sector incentives for AI development. This perspective underscores the importance of encouraging and facilitating AI driven entrepreneurship and investment as a means to promote economic prosperity.

The anodyne nature of ChatGPT

Here, I must admit, that the paragraphs above are not written by me. I've asked ChatGPT to provide short intros on AI from a Marxist and a capitalist perspective. That's what it came up with. One could argue that it has been well trained on Marxism 101 and gathered enough data to present some aspects of these opposing world views. One can certainly see some of the key phrases of Marxist and capitalist terminology, in this otherwise not exceptionally intelligent or exciting output. The real difficulty emerged when I challenged ChatGPT on 'which perspective is serving the greater good of humanity, therefore, which is the 'better' one'. It gave me rather a pointless response by saying that,

The question of whether the Marxist or capitalist perspective on AI is better is a matter of personal and ideological beliefs. It's essential to understand that both perspectives have their strengths and weaknesses, and what is 'better' depends on one's

values and the specific context in which AI is being discussed.

It added that,

The ‘better’ perspective depends on your values and the specific goals you aim to achieve. In practice, many societies seek to strike a balance between these perspectives by implementing policies and regulations that encourage innovation and economic growth while also addressing social and ethical concerns related to AI. Ultimately, the question of which perspective is better is a matter of ongoing debate, and the optimal approach likely lies in a synthesis of ideas from different perspectives to create a framework that fosters AI's benefits while mitigating its potential drawbacks. It's crucial to consider the specific context, goals, and values when evaluating these perspectives in real world applications.

Notice the summary conclusions (below) ChatGPT has produced after insisting that ‘better’ relies on values and ideology. Basically, it said,

- In practice, many societies seek to strike a balance between these perspectives by implementing policies and regulations that

encourage innovation and economic growth while also addressing social and ethical concerns related to AI.

- The optimal approach likely lies in a synthesis of ideas from different perspectives to create a framework that fosters AI's benefits while mitigating its potential drawbacks.

The seemingly intelligent, objective, and factual AI has concluded that we should merge the interests of capital with the interests of the working class -all the while ensuring that AI continues to be centrally utilised.

Its big data is telling us that ‘AI innovation’, driven by the profit motive in a business-friendly environment can be blended with the wellbeing of the working class. Bring on Labour Party Socialism! When further asked whether it had any ideological or moral stand on the conclusions it produced, it responded by saying,

In the case of comparing Marxist and capitalist perspectives on AI, my aim was to provide an objective overview of the key points from each perspective to assist you in understanding the range of viewpoints. I do not endorse or promote any particular ideology, philosophy, or moral values. My

responses are neutral and based on the information available up to my knowledge cutoff date in January 2022.

But ChatGPT, does make moral and political judgements. Its conclusions are not independent of the ‘dominant ideas’ of the ‘dominant class’ that owns AI technology and educates it with big data. It just summarised what every liberal pro-capitalist concludes on AI – that it should be created in a private environment mindful of the wider social impacts. Our conversation went on until I realised that the responses were becoming increasingly repetitive.

Intelligence versus ‘Big Data’

In an opinion piece titled “The False Promise of ChatGPT” in the *New York Times*, Noam Chomsky wrote,

The human mind is not, like ChatGPT and its ilk, a lumbering statistical engine for pattern matching, gorging on hundreds of terabytes of data and extrapolating the most likely conversational response or most probable answer to a scientific question. On the contrary, the human mind is a surprisingly efficient and even elegant system that operates with small amounts of information; it seeks not to infer brute correlations

among data points but to create explanations.¹

Looking at AI from a ‘human intelligence and learning’ point of view, Chomsky takes a generally dismissive attitude. Considering my own conversations with ChatGPT, the outputs were impressive, but not necessarily intelligent when judged against the creativity of a human mind. To get the outputs from ChatGPT, and more importantly, to interpret these statements beyond their mere factuality; to be able to draw conclusions in real life, a human intelligence was needed. AI learns from human intelligence and the knowledge produced by humans. It can’t replace that creativity. But, as in every scientific and technological advancement, AI could be used to take away the burden of repetitive, non-creative work and the hardship and stress that comes with it. It could free human beings from long and boring work. It could give workers more opportunity to be creative. Just think of some of the positive applications. AI can

- Be used to advance healthcare services through disease diagnosis and early detection, drug development and aiding critical medical procedures.
- Assist academic research and education by providing new and exciting educational tools.

- Play a huge role in climate modelling and public transport planning.
- Provide accessibility through assistive technology – AI powered devices and applications can assist people with disabilities by providing speech recognition, image descriptions, and other tools.
- Help with language translation to eliminate communication barriers.
- Provide creative tools for artists, as well as simulation tools for engineering.

But, as with every advance in technology under capitalism, we will not see billions invested in AI for greater public services or the advancement of human development. Instead, it will be used to drive market competition and profitability. In this context, AI has already been deployed,

- In a dangerous agenda of ‘predictive policing’ which greatly threatens human rights and freedoms.
- To exacerbate racism by relying on data sets that are themselves created in racist conditions.
- To exacerbate inequality by ensuring that access to medical equipment and medical procedures are often distributed

based on one’s income and one’s citizenship.

- To heighten the dangers of imperialism through autonomous weapons, military simulations, military applications etc.
- To threaten to our academic and artistic creativity.

AI under capitalism clearly poses a threat to workers, while AI under imperialism can become a mass killing machine.

Automation without Emancipation

Robots, automation, advanced software, and computing power in many sectors, from heavy industries to finance, from healthcare to services are not new. From the beginning of the 20th century, the speed of technological advancements has quickened, however, with massive developments in computing technology from the late 20th century onwards. Comparing the level of automation in the 1980s to what we see today, we could describe the pace of technological innovation as mind-blowing. The computing power of a large mainframe 20 years ago, fits into a smart phone today. Cloud technologies coupled with super-fast computing power have genuinely transformed the world of AI and automation. Approximately 347.3 billion emails are sent globally each day. An estimated 100 billion WhatsApp

messages appear on our smart phones daily. There are 2.95 billion monthly active users on Facebook. Twitter has 368 million monthly active users worldwide. 1.8 billion people use Gmail. TikTok has 1 billion monthly users. Instagram is expected to hit 2.5 billion users by the end of 2023. All of these platforms are highly automated, integrated and use advanced software technologies such as machine learning and AI. You can book a holiday from your Xbox console while playing a flight simulator game. Renewing your insurance policy is a matter of a few clicks. In some countries, your GP sends a digital code to your pharmacist, and you scan a QCR code with your phone to purchase your medicine.

Yet with all of this innovation, the cost of medical care and medicine is not reducing. There are now apps that claim to bioanalyse your daily life cycle and make food/rest/physical activity recommendations to keep you fit and healthy. But the cost of food is not reducing either. Instead, food prices have rocketed, and world hunger is still a massive problem. AI has created a growing debate in the academy and the arts, but it is still not eradicating basic challenges around food, water, and shelter for the world's poorest people. Some of the greatest minds in mathematics, computer and data science are behind the developments in AI. But it

is not these figures that are at the forefront of the AI debate, but voices for marketing and business opportunities.

What does AI mean for Capital and Labour?

In this context, a simple question emerges: What does AI mean for capital and labour? In a wider sense, what does it mean for society in general? The answer to these questions is more complex than just a simple 'good' or 'bad'. Nor it is an answer that can be provided in isolation from the social and class conditions we live in today. Given the current differences in wealth and power, it is not surprising that capitalist firms are investing vast sums into AI research and technology to give them a greater understanding of the opportunities and the utilisation of AI. The most important discussions are also being dominated by capital, while trade unions and labour organisations are far behind in terms of their understanding and not fully up to speed in developing strategies or leading discussions in the interest of the working class they represent. But they need to start catching up.

According to the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the recently drafted European Union (EU) Artificial Intelligence Act contains so little on workers' rights that a whole new piece of legislation will be required. The ETUC

assessment is that the EU parliament failed to close a loophole which leaves workers' safety and fundamental rights at risk and that this will need to be closed if AI is to be rolled out successfully. Unfortunately, beyond the top layers of the unions, there is not much engagement with the members concerned. The unions will have to learn from their members on the ground in a world where they have demobilised them for decades. Meanwhile, AI is becoming a household term very fast, and many working people are starting to worry about its potential implications. A 2023 Ipsos survey conducted in 31 countries found that, on average, 52 percent are nervous about products and services that use AI.² Some of the reasons listed were, lack of understanding, mixed feelings and increased nervousness, geographical differences, expected impacts on lives and jobs and the fears that come with it. But it is not all one way traffic. A 2023 Pew Research Centre report estimates that 1 percent of all U.S. jobs have high exposure to AI.³ But despite this, many of the workers in the most exposed industries still felt that AI will help them more than hurting them personally. For instance, 32 percent of workers in information and technology said AI will help them more, compared with 11 percent who said it will hurt them more. These responses may be down to cultural differences, but it is also likely to do with the fact that there will be contradictory

impacts – people may benefit from AI in one part of their lives while being threatened by it in another. There is just so much to drill into when it comes to AI in terms of the social-political and economic consequences. Furthermore, for socialists, developing a sophisticated class analysis will be essential.

An important aspect here is the international imperialist competition to control the benefits of AI. Hi-tech industries are in a race to dominate information and data opportunities, while global retail, services and financial corporations are in a race to dominate markets using AI solutions. There is also a significant race between the U.S. and China to dominate AI globally. Recently, China has relaxed its AI rules and issued new regulations around the public use and industrial developments associated with AI. In line with its wider strategy, China wants to control AI in its sphere of influence, while the US has put pressure on its allies to avoid Chinese based technologies. New measures signed by the Biden administration target investments in semiconductors, microelectronics, quantum computing and certain AI capabilities. They also require outbound U.S. investors to provide notifications to the Treasury Department to track investment in rival technologies.⁴ AI is thus a technology battleground among the global capitalist

and imperialist powers, and this pushes it further from the interests of workers.

Will AI cause job losses?

This is not an easy question. It depends. Did computerisation and automation cause job losses? Yes, and no! Take a simple example: There are more self-checkout counters than human attended counters in most supermarkets around the country. There are more people buying tickets and checking in online for their flights than before. But with the exceptions of major crises of capitalism, such as the global banking crisis of 2008-09 or the Covid pandemic, the rate of employment isn't falling.⁵ Maybe the question is not as black and white as, will AI cause job losses? But more like, how will AI impact jobs and workers? Will certain jobs disappear while others emerge? Will certain sectors be more impacted than others? What might the impact be? If AI increasingly reduces workers in jobs that are automated, will it also develop new areas of employment managing AI platforms and big data? Understanding facts on world population dynamics are useful while thinking about the impacts of technology on employment.⁶ Since the 1990s, technology and automation have been growing faster than ever. We are in a hyperdrive period for technology development even if the question of technology vs job losses has been a long

running one. Its modern version first emerged in car manufacturing plants, travel and finance sectors, sales, and marketing sectors back in the 1980's. With AI this question has certainly taken on a new significance, but world population continues to grow, as does the numbers in employment and the rates of technological innovation.⁷ The same seems true in Ireland, where the number of people in employment rose to a record of 2,574,000 in the final quarter of 2022, an increase of 2.7pc over the previous year, despite the advancements in automation and self-service driven business models developed over the last decade.⁸

Understanding that AI is increasingly built into the logic of capitalism makes it important to understand what it might mean for the fundamental relations between workers and employers. One thing for sure, is that capitalist firms are in a competitive race to make the best use of AI for efficiencies and higher profits. But where the world of AI ultimately goes will depend on much more complex forces than just capital's race for technology. Perhaps most importantly, it will depend on how the working classes and their organisations respond? Will the race for technology exacerbate capitalist crises and exploitation or will it force workers into action? One way to begin to think about these dynamics is through the prism of the Egyptian Revolution.

Back in 2012, I reviewed Paul Mason's book, "Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions" – which tried to explain the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions, with a focus on Egypt. The review concluded that "it is well written and has undoubtedly been very influential, but it shares a key weakness of all but the very best journalism, namely it tends to be superficial and impressionistic in its analysis. It picks up on and elaborates two of the most common 'journalistic' explanations of the wave of revolt: 1) that it is a generational thing; 2) that its other main driver is the use of social media." But serious analysis understood that technology was a useful tool within the revolt but never its main driver. The revolt happened partly because the Egyptian masses had been held down by a murderous regime for so long and partly because they gained confidence from the events in Tunisia, but also the painstaking work of activists on the ground and in the workplaces. Technology allowed activists to communicate with each other, but it didn't create the class dynamics or the balance of class forces.

This tells us that the class struggle will ultimately determine how technology is used. And if capitalist history is anything to go by, the introduction of AI machines will likely create the same antagonisms that existed when the first machines

began to dominate during the industrial revolution. AI assumes Marx hasn't written extensively on the subject, but in Chapter 15 of Capital Volume 1: 'Machinery and Modern Industry', and especially the section on 'The Strife Between Workman and Machine' he delved in great detail into the class dynamics of the "machine". We are currently in a period of major AI hype, but beyond the most prominent commentators who fetishise or hate AI, are the real social forces that Marx identified over 150 years ago, and it will be these forces that will set the course for AI in the future. We are expected to think that AI is a fundamental game changer. So much so, it will create a new world. Will it really? How? Under what circumstances? Perhaps most importantly, will AI invalidate the economic findings in the annual Oxfam reports that show capital taking the lion's share of all new technological benefits. Some headlines from the 2023 Oxfam 'Survival of the Richest Report' are outlined below:

- The richest 1 percent grabbed nearly two thirds of all new wealth - worth \$42 trillion - created since 2020, almost twice as much as the bottom 99 percent of the world's population.
- In 2019, Oxfam found that the world's 26 richest people owned

as much as the poorest 50 percent of the world's population.

- 5 years before that, in 2014, the world's 85 richest people had same wealth as the bottom 50 percent.⁹

Final Thoughts

The 21st century will undoubtedly bring further advancements in science and technology and provided we can stop climate change and its associated disasters; these will continue to both pose dangers and provide benefits to humanity. AI will almost certainly bring greater productivity, faster profits, and competitive advantages to capital. It will also have profound impacts on workers and society, but it is too early to make strong predictions. What we do know, however, is that what will shape the future of humanity will not be simply technology and high tech advances but the social class forces that have been at conflict with each other since the dawn of capitalism. AI brings new concerns and opportunities but the fundamentals of the class divisions, and all that comes with it, have not changed. What is more, horrors such as global inequality, imperialist conflicts, wars, exploitation, and alienation are deepening.

The debate on AI must and will continue around fundamental matters such as labour and automation, exploitation,

workers' rights; ownership and control; public ownership and regulation; climate change; just transition and the social-political impacts of technology. Underlying these debates will be the struggles of workers to live without exploitation – to turn the new technologies into tools of liberation. Isn't it great that we can book a holiday on our console or make transactions on a website. Isn't it horrible, that with all the advancement in technology, intelligence and wealth, there are still hundreds of millions of people that can't have a home, never mind playing Xbox or booking their next holiday.

And for millions of others, climate related displacement is a reality, not in some distant future, but today. In a society free from the chains of capitalism, in a socialist world, where all resources and human knowledge are shared democratically, where workers are not alienated and exploited and where the society is organised in a way that is 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs', technology would not be tool for the profit interests of the ruling class but an opportunity for advancing living conditions for all. In other words, **AI for People, Not for Profit**

Figure 1: Historical Employment Rates – Ireland (Percent)

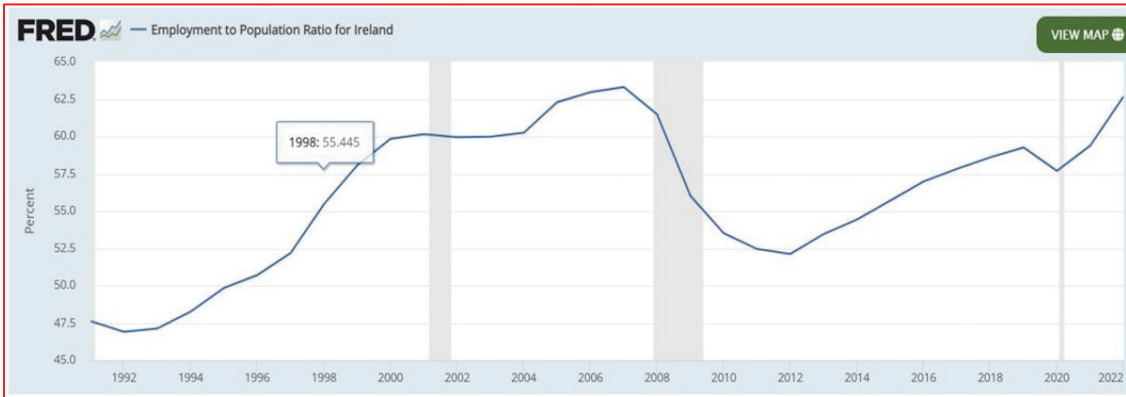


Figure 2: Number of People Employed Globally (Billion)

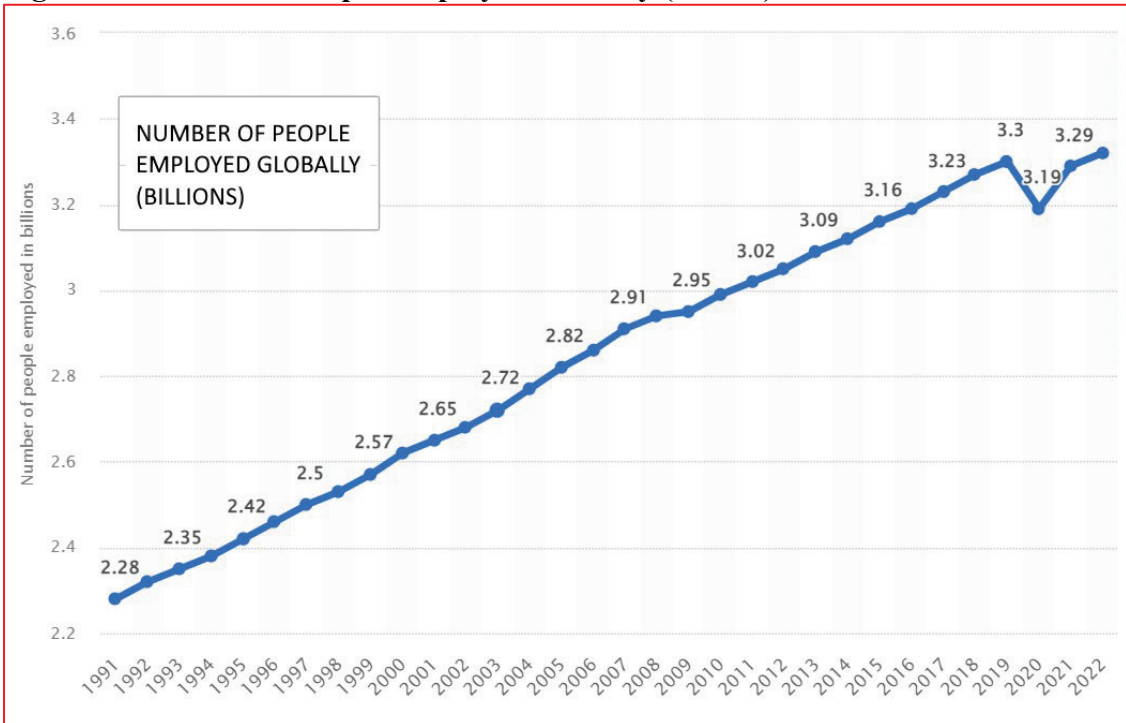


Figure 3: World Population and Employment Numbers (Billion/%)

| Year | Employment | World Population | Population Change | Employment Change | % Working |
|------|------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------|
| 1991 | 2.28 | 5.41 | 1.69% | | 42.17% |
| 1992 | 2.32 | 5.49 | 1.60% | 1.75% | 42.24% |
| 1993 | 2.35 | 5.58 | 1.54% | 1.29% | 42.13% |
| 1994 | 2.38 | 5.66 | 1.49% | 1.28% | 42.04% |
| 1995 | 2.42 | 5.74 | 1.46% | 1.68% | 42.14% |
| 1996 | 2.46 | 5.83 | 1.43% | 1.65% | 42.23% |
| 1997 | 2.5 | 5.91 | 1.40% | 1.63% | 42.33% |
| 1998 | 2.53 | 5.99 | 1.37% | 1.20% | 42.26% |
| 1999 | 2.57 | 6.07 | 1.34% | 1.58% | 42.36% |
| 2000 | 2.6 | 6.15 | 1.34% | 1.17% | 42.28% |
| 2001 | 2.65 | 6.23 | 1.33% | 1.92% | 42.53% |
| 2002 | 2.68 | 6.31 | 1.31% | 1.13% | 42.46% |
| 2003 | 2.72 | 6.39 | 1.29% | 1.49% | 42.54% |
| 2004 | 2.77 | 6.48 | 1.28% | 1.84% | 42.77% |
| 2005 | 2.82 | 6.56 | 1.27% | 1.81% | 43.00% |
| 2006 | 2.86 | 6.64 | 1.27% | 1.42% | 43.06% |
| 2007 | 2.91 | 6.73 | 1.27% | 1.75% | 43.27% |
| 2008 | 2.94 | 6.81 | 1.27% | 1.03% | 43.16% |
| 2009 | 2.95 | 6.90 | 1.27% | 0.34% | 42.76% |
| 2010 | 2.99 | 6.99 | 1.27% | 1.36% | 42.80% |
| 2011 | 3.02 | 7.07 | 1.25% | 1.00% | 42.70% |
| 2012 | 3.05 | 7.16 | 1.25% | 0.99% | 42.59% |
| 2013 | 3.09 | 7.25 | 1.24% | 1.31% | 42.62% |
| 2014 | 3.12 | 7.34 | 1.22% | 0.97% | 42.51% |
| 2015 | 3.16 | 7.43 | 1.19% | 1.28% | 42.55% |
| 2016 | 3.19 | 7.51 | 1.17% | 0.95% | 42.46% |
| 2017 | 3.23 | 7.60 | 1.15% | 1.25% | 42.50% |
| 2018 | 3.27 | 7.68 | 1.10% | 1.24% | 42.56% |
| 2019 | 3.3 | 7.76 | 1.06% | 0.92% | 42.50% |
| 2020 | 3.19 | 7.84 | 0.98% | -3.33% | 40.68% |
| 2021 | 3.29 | 7.91 | 0.87% | 3.13% | 41.60% |
| 2022 | 3.32 | 7.98 | 0.83% | 0.91% | 41.63% |

Endnotes

¹ Noam Chomsky, The False Promise of ChatGPT, The New York Times, 8 March 2023.

² Global Views on A.I. 2023. A 31-Country Global Advisory Survey, July 2023, www.ipsos.com

³ Pew Research Centre. Which U.S. Workers Are More Exposed to AI on Their Jobs? www.pewresearch.org

⁴ Biden bans range of high-tech US investments in China citing national security risk. *The Guardian* 23 August 2023.

⁵ See the Appendix for more details.

⁶ I have prepared some data graphics to aid with this using official data sources from various agencies (ILO, World Bank, Statista, EU, IMF, UN). These are available in the appendix.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Central Statistics Office, Ireland, www.cso.ie.

⁹ Survival of the Richest, 16 January 2023, Oxfam International, www.oxfam.org.

Science, Capitalism & Catastrophe

Mark Walsh

*I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light. Byron*

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Thus begins *The Darkness*, Lord Byron's terrifying description of the last days of a dying world. Written in the summer of 1816, while Byron (along with friends including Percy Shelley and his wife Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley) vacationed near Lake Geneva, the poem is partly inspired by an event which took place a year earlier on the other side of the world. In April 1815, Mount Tambora, a volcano in the Indonesian archipelago, erupted. Estimated to be the largest volcanic blast in recorded history, its ferocity was such that the top 1.5 kilometers of the mountain was completely obliterated. Tens of millions of tons of ash (mostly sulphur) were sent high into the atmosphere. At such altitudes, dust can take years to dissipate forming what scientists call a "persistent stratospheric sulphate aerosol veil".¹ The effect of this was to restrict the sunlight reaching the Earth's surface, leading to global crop failures, hunger, and disease.

While likely unaware of the cause, Byron and his friends were struck by the bleak atmospheric conditions: thunderstorms, icy winds, constant rainfall, and a dearth of sunlight.

The disquieting darkness led 1816 to be known as the “year without a summer” and led Byron’s party, eager to enjoy outdoor pursuits, to instead seek refuge in the more cerebral activity of writing ghost stories. Two great literary works emerged from that grim vacation which are frighteningly relevant today. The less famous of these was Byron’s *The Darkness*. The other, far more famous and written by the eighteen-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley, was the beautiful and moving gothic novel, *Frankenstein*. Wollstonecraft-Shelley’s novel tells the story of scientist Dr Victor Frankenstein’s creation of a sentient life form. The creature has human traits but is freakishly large and Dr Frankenstein soon loses control of the powerful beast, to terrible effect. Though dealing with a variety of deep questions concerning consciousness and love, *Frankenstein* is mostly remembered as a cautionary tale. The full title of the book was ‘*Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*’, an allusion to the Titan, Prometheus, in Greek mythology who created humans so that Zeus could bequeath them with a life force. Prometheus comes to a rather sticky end when, having stolen the secret of fire from Zeus as a gift for humanity, Zeus chains him to a rock in the Caucasus and sets an eagle to forever peck out his immortal liver. In the case of Dr Victor Frankenstein, the death and destruction unleashed by his ‘monster’ present a

stark warning to the title character’s “*unquestioned belief that the products of science and technology are an unqualified blessing for mankind*”.²

A great paradox

Given the precarious place our species occupies, Byron’s deathly vision and Wollstonecraft-Shelley’s caution against scientific hubris feel alarmingly apposite. We face extinction threats on multiple fronts: from catastrophic climate change to nuclear annihilation. Indeed, the world Byron describes bears an uncanny resemblance to that predicted by scientific models of nuclear winter.³ There is good reason for this. Scientists have applied the lessons of volcanic eruptions, like Mount Tambora, to model the likely climactic effects of nuclear war. It is now well understood that even a relatively small nuclear exchange (a regional conflict between India and Pakistan, say) involving only about 0.03 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons, would send enough soot hurtling into the stratosphere to cause global crop failures and cataclysmic famine.⁴ This is without even considering the blasts themselves or the effects of radioactivity.

We are confronted with the greatest of paradoxes. In parallel to our deepening understanding of nature and our ever-growing ability to harness its power, our world is becoming dangerously

inhospitable. Technological revolutions in industry and agriculture have given us productive capacities undreamt of by any previous generation. And yet these very capacities allow our world to be filled with junk and our atmosphere with greenhouse gasses which threaten to cook us. We can produce lifesaving medicines and yet our use of antibiotics, along with our modern farming methods, creates resistant superbugs which endanger us all.⁵ Most extraordinary, the culmination of centuries of incremental toil and profound thought in physics and mathematics, leading, for example, to the splitting of the atom, has resulted in a collection of weapons that could realise Byron's lifeless world in a matter of minutes.

Some people are tempted by a certain misanthropic fatalism at this point. Humanity, the argument goes, cannot be trusted with such profound knowledge or powerful technology. Perhaps we would be better off in a state of pre-scientific ignorance? That way we would be less likely to destroy ourselves and the life-forms we share the planet with. While this view is deeply pessimistic (and wrong), it is certainly understandable. For every scientific advance, there seems to be a dangerous downside. The airplane can be used to connect loved ones who live oceans apart. At the same time, air travel is a notorious contributor to global warming. Ever more efficient machines

that save us from back-breaking toil threaten our ecosystem with a seemingly unbounded ability to flood our world with 'stuff'. Then there are the lost livelihoods of the workers they replace. Indeed, in the case of so-called artificial intelligence, (and without even considering some of the apocalyptic forecasts made by some in this field) it is not just menial tasks but the creative labour of artists and writers that may be usurped.⁶

Worst of all, there are examples, such as the construction of weapons, where scientific knowledge is put intentionally to nefarious purposes. Albert Einstein, on learning that atomic bombs had been used on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is reported to have exclaimed 'If I had known they were going to do this, I would have become a shoemaker'. While Einstein was not directly involved in the Manhattan Project to build an atomic bomb, his contributions to physics formed a significant part of the theoretical background to the endeavour. Faced with the prospect of one's explorations into nature's fundamental structure giving rise to world-destroying technology, one can surely sympathise with Einstein's sentiment. In the end, Einstein did not quit science although he did dedicate much of his later years to campaigning for nuclear disarmament.

Disillusionment in science

The universe is mysterious and human intuition (also known as common sense) is often a poor guide to understanding it. After all, common sense suggested to many that the Earth is flat! The scientific method of carefully testing hypotheses, along with an unsentimental willingness to reform or even replace ideas which are contradicted by experiment, is humanity's way of compensating. Science, ideally, should be a humble, questioning, self-critical search for understanding and its fruits should nurture humanity as a whole. Yet despite its undoubted achievements, there is a glaring contradiction between what science ought to deliver, and the reality of life for much of our species and indeed our biosphere.

The gap between the promise science holds and what it delivers is reflected, partly, in the growth of pseudo-science as well as suspicion and cynicism of scientific expertise. The sale of homeopathic treatments and dubious dietary supplements is a multi-billion-euro industry. So called 'gurus' like Deepak Chopra make fortunes selling books and 'quack' remedies, hijacking the language of real scientific theories like quantum mechanics to give intellectual validity to what is nothing more than new-age hokum.⁷ Ironically,

while this sort of grifting has a long history, it is the advent of communication technologies, precisely based on scientific theories such as quantum mechanics, that has greatly extended the reach of such charlatans.

Another form of pseudo-science is so-called 'scientific racism' and the baseless claims, couched in scientific language, that superficial differences like skin colour are connected to differences in mental ability. This has its origins in the need to dehumanise swathes of humanity in order to justify slavery, at a time when the language of liberty and emancipation (for some) was invoked in the struggle by a rising merchant class to cast off the old feudal system. Such falsehoods though utterly debunked (in, for example, classic texts like *The Mismeasure of Man* by Stephen J. Gould and *Not in Our Genes* by Stephen Rose, Leon Kamin and Richard Lewontin or the recently published "Superior" by Angela Saini) were (and still are) often promulgated by respectable scientists.

Scientific ignorance costs lives, as the recent pandemic has taught us. The National Institute of Health in the United States estimates that well over 200,000 American adults died from Covid 19 because of their refusal to be vaccinated.⁸ Mistrust of vaccines more generally (arising from the spread of misinformation) has meant a resurgence

in diseases like measles, pertussis, and polio.⁹ Social media algorithms and the ease with which misinformation can spread are no doubt major factors in all of this. It is certainly true that the role of scientific education (preferably based on empathy and an understanding of where people are coming from) as a counter to this is an essential one. But this alone is insufficient and misses a crucial point.

Consider the case of Covid 19 and the suspicion around vaccination. Naomi Klein in her recent book, *Doppelganger*, argues that, when considering concerns about the effects of vaccines on pregnant women, “rather than commentators summarily shutting down questions as frivolous or nutty, there should have been ample room in public debates and reliable media for concerns about how vaccines would impact reproductive health.”¹⁰ Klein goes on to say that for many, these concerns were based much more on suspicion of the pharmaceutical industry, governments, and perceived elites, than they were on skepticism of the philosophical underpinnings of science. When one considers the role played by companies like Johnson and Johnson in perpetuating a deadly opioid crisis in the United States, or the astonishing wealth that companies like Pfizer accumulated during the pandemic, the anti-vaccination attitude, while mistaken, becomes more understandable.

There are good reasons why people should be suspicious of governments and powerful corporations (including corporate media). The legacy of the 2008 financial crash and the reckless greed of the financial establishment is still with us. History is replete with examples of governments lying to their people, often to justify wars. The falsehood about weapons of mass destruction used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq is just one example in a litany of such lies. Corporations lie all the time and often use quite sophisticated technology to do it. In 2017, for example, US prosecutors demonstrated that between 2009 and 2015, the Volkswagen Group had deliberately added devices to over 11 million of its cars to cheat an emissions test. After initial denials and claims that the discrepancies were mere technical glitches, pressure from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) eventually lead to a complete admission of responsibility. The scandal was not, as Volkswagen had at one stage maintained “the work of a few software engineers” but went right to the top of the organisation.¹¹

Research by scientists working at companies like Exxon and Shell has, since the late 1970s, predicted that the continued burning of fossil fuels would result in “potentially catastrophic events”, “the disappearance of specific ecosystems and habitat destruction”, and

warned that many parts of the world, including the American Midwest could be turned to desert.¹² At the same time its own researchers were engaged in high quality scientific work endorsing the expert consensus on climate change, Exxon was simultaneously funding climate change denying think tanks doing precisely the opposite. Following the playbook of the tobacco industry before it, this included funding shoddy research based on cherry-picked data which contradicted the serious work of its own scientists!

It is here that we begin to see the role of science in a more meaningful context. While we may aspire towards an ideal, objective version of science which seeks only to benefit humanity, science takes place in a world where the benefit of humanity is often a low priority. The Exxon example is a particularly instructive one. On the one hand, to prosper in the marketplace, Exxon requires top quality scientific research, work which is as unbiased and objective as science can feasibly be. And yet the conclusions of that research are either hidden from the public, or to the extent that much of this research did end up in peer-reviewed journals, drowned out with aggressive campaigns of misinformation and enough seemingly serious contradictory research to sow doubt in the scientific consensus. As I will argue, this example is not an exception but

represents a general tendency. While many, if not most, scientists strive toward a scientific ideal, and while wonderful results are often achieved, the economic and political structure of our society, namely capitalism, has a distorting effect. Put simply, science under capitalism is a warped version of what science could be.

The co-emergence of capitalism and science

The historian of science, Clifford D. Conner, argues that what we call science,

...originated with the people closest to nature: hunter-gatherers, peasant farmers, sailors, miners, blacksmiths, folk healers, and others forced by the conditions of their lives to wrest the means of their survival from an encounter with nature on a daily basis.¹³

There are numerous examples of this: the domestication of plant and animal species by preliterate ancient peoples (virtually every fruit or vegetable you can purchase in a supermarket was cultivated this way); the development of chemistry, metallurgy and the materials sciences from the knowledge obtained by ancient miners, smiths and potters; the debt owed by mathematics to surveyors, merchants and mechanics. As Conner points out, when one considers the undoubtedly brilliant scientific contributions by figures like Newton or Einstein, one must

remember that these contributions are built on a mountain of knowledge gathered incrementally over millennia by “massed ranks of labourers, craftsmen, miners, potters, artisans and low mechanics”.¹⁴

Over time, what we might call scientific knowledge was gained (often at great cost), shared, bought, sold, stolen, and sometimes lost. At various times and in different parts of the world, in classical Greece, in Baghdad or China during the Middle Ages, the scientific project flourished. Roughly speaking, what we call ‘modern science’ emerged during the 16th and 17th centuries as the old scholastic tradition (which was based on preserving and interpreting the knowledge of ancient classical scholars like Aristotle) was transcended through knowledge flowing from the practical workshop techniques of European artisans. The new scientific worldview was also deeply connected with a more general revolutionary process involving the rise of a new capitalist class and its eventual defeat of the old feudal order. Friedrich Engels, one of the most insightful thinkers on the role of science in human history, regarded this as:

“the greatest progressive revolution that mankind has so far experienced. ... Natural science developed in the midst of the general revolution and was itself thoroughly revolutionary”.¹⁵

As the rising capitalist class expanded its wealth and power, it required understanding of the natural world, the better to exploit it. This was a powerful stimulus for scientific discovery, one which utterly transformed our understanding of the world and our place in it. One crucial early development in this transformation was the adoption in Europe of the Hindu-Arabic number system (the positional number system we use today). This arose from the interactions of European merchants with traders from the Arab world and the observation that their Arabic counterparts had far superior arithmetical techniques. The importance of this technological advance cannot be overstated - anyone who doubts this should try doing long division with Roman numerals.

The dismantling of the old Aristotelian picture of an Earth-centered universe and its replacement with a heliocentric model, put forward by Nicolas Copernicus in 1543, is the most famous consequence of this revolution. The new model was later improved by Johannes Kepler, substituting circular planetary trajectories with elliptical ones. More upheaval was to follow when Galileo, with the newly invented telescope, showed that Jupiter (and not just the Earth) had moons while the supposedly pristine surface of the sun contained dark spots. Galileo was a revolutionary in another way. The idea of testing

hypotheses through observable evidence, rather than simply interpreting the writings of the old masters, was itself a radical departure from the scholastic tradition which had held sway for centuries. Importantly, this practical approach had its origins in the craftsman's workshop. Galileo's experiments on motion tested, and often debunked, preconceived intuitive notions.

Following this, Issac Newton formulated a coherent set of laws concerning motion and gravitation. From these simple principles could be deduced everything from Kepler's elliptical planetary orbits to the movement of Earthly tides, to the falling of apples from trees. The crowning scientific achievement of this age was the invention by Newton (and independently by Gottfried Leibniz) of Calculus, a potent mathematical language for describing movement and change. Newton's laws concerning motion and gravity were enormously successful. So successful in fact, that many concluded that the universe was simply an enormous clockwork mechanism, regular, predictable, and unchanging.

Figures like Galileo and Newton were no doubt motivated by a deep curiosity about the natural world. It is difficult to imagine how anybody could gain such insights without this. However, it is important to remember that their interests

and the problems they worked on were also motivated by the needs of the day. For example, much of Galileo's work on motion was based on the practical knowledge of ballistics accumulated by contemporary military experts. Galileo also made contributions to the study of the strength of materials, in part motivated by the challenges faced by the Venetian navy in building large galleys.¹⁶ Newton was particularly interested in the problem of computing longitude at sea and the related problem of time keeping in navigation. This was a very serious problem for seafarers and epitomised the growing need for ever more precise measuring devices. Ocean navigation was now a primary route to claiming new colonies and making vast profits. The longitude problem was eventually solved not by Newton, but by the master clockmaker, John Harrison.¹⁷

While developments in science were enhancing the productive process, the reverse was also the case. New methods of production and the exploration (and exploitation) of new territories, were providing a powerful stimulus for scientific discovery. One beautiful example of this is the deduction that the Earth is not perfectly round but is slightly flattened at the poles, while bulging at the equator.¹⁸ In 1672, the French astronomer Jean Richer, while travelling to the colony of Cayenne in South America, observed that near the equator a

pendulum swings slightly more slowly. There seemed no obvious explanation for this unless the force of gravity varied at different points on the earth. Newton heard about Richer's observation and concluded that this radical suggestion is precisely the case, performing the relevant calculations in his Principia. Even more radical still, Newton concluded from this that the earth could not be perfectly round but rather was an oblate spheroid.

Examples like this illustrate the potency of careful observation (aided by increasingly sophisticated instruments) combined with deep theoretical understanding. This growing understanding, even if for many it remained hidden behind difficult mathematical language, instilled the rising merchant class with a tremendous confidence. The success of theories such as Newton's were confirmation of the views expressed by Francis Bacon almost a century earlier: that nature could be understood and controlled.¹⁹ Thus, alongside its enhanced practical power over both the natural world, and consequently much of humanity, the scientific revolution provided the newly birthed capitalist class with significant intellectual and ideological power. This would prove crucial in the political revolutions (some of which were already in progress) which would see capitalism prevail over the old feudal order.

Scientific development now proceeded at a tremendous pace, in tandem with the rapidly expanding capitalist system. The scientific revolution had witnessed a flourishing of ever more sophisticated tools and mechanical instruments. By the late 18th and early 19th century, the industrial revolution was in full swing, spawning a host of new sciences. Capitalist competition meant the need for ever more efficient machines that could control the forces of nature and control the forces of human labour too. The development of steam engines led to the study of heat (thermodynamics). The pioneering work of Michael Faraday (the son of a blacksmith with no formal mathematical training) in understanding electromagnetic force through ingenious experimentation and geometric intuition paved the way for a sequence of astonishing inventions: the electric motor, the coil dynamo (generator) and the incandescent lightbulb. As understanding of these physical phenomena grew, scientists began to see deep connections between them. Different forms of energy could be turned into one another and what united them all was a principle called the Conservation of Energy.

Marx's Dialectical Approach to Science

One philosopher who kept abreast of the new scientific developments was Karl Marx. Seeking to understand the new

90 capitalist society that was growing up around him, Marx was struck by the extreme disparities that were arising as scientific knowledge of the world was growing. At the heart of this was the fact that workers are alienated both from the means, and the fruits, of the production they carry out. The human experience of mechanisation (which in today's world includes robotics and so-called artificial intelligence) illustrated to Marx quite clearly the 'inverted world' that capitalism was shaping. While the productive capacities of humanity were exponentially improving, both in quality and quantity, people were forced to work ever harder. Or they could be told their creative talents were obsolete and face the loss of their livelihoods. In 1844, Marx wrote:

The more the worker produces, the less he has to consume. The more value he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes. Capitalism replaces labour by machines, but it throws one section of workers back to a barbarous kind of labour, and it turns the other section into a machine.²⁰

The fact that the machines were (and still are) owned by a capitalist class, locked into a competitive struggle for profits that necessitated continued growth, created an absurd dynamic. Instead of technological and scientific progress being the servant

of humanity, for many of us, and in the most meaningful ways, capitalism reverses this. In a rational society, mechanisation and the productive benefits that ensue, should mean we all work less without any material loss. The term 'luddite' is used in common parlance as a derogatory term referring to one with an aversion to new technology. In the context of the alienated form of labour Marx describes, one cannot but feel sympathy for the textile workers who, seeing their livelihoods ruined by new mechanised looms, adopted the name 'luddite' (follower of legendary weaver, Ned Ludd) and launched a revolt. This involved, among other things, the destruction of factory machines in clandestine raids.²¹

The philosophical and economic theories developed by Marx, and his collaborator Friedrich Engels (whose contributions to these matters were substantial), were deeply influenced by the new scientific theories emerging in the 19th century. These sciences differed in an important way from Newtonian mechanics. Newton's universe was a static clockwork mechanism consisting of discrete well-defined parts. The new sciences, like thermodynamics and electromagnetism, were all about transformation and flow. This is something which harked back to the intuition of the Greek atomist philosophers like Heraclitus and

Epicurus. It was becoming increasingly clear that previously disjointed categories, such as organic and inorganic matter, could no longer be so easily separated; developments in chemistry showed that living things were composed of the same sort of matter as non-living things.

The most spectacular example of this was the theory, due to Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin, that all species had evolved incrementally from common ancestors through the process of natural selection. Combined with the new subject of geology it was now clear that the world had a history. Entities emerged, disappeared, or transformed into other entities. What were once thought of as fixed permanent categories (of the sort Aristotle once grappled with): a mountain, a man, or a dog, were now being understood in a much fuzzier way. A mountain today may have once (a very long time ago) been a plain. The clear distinction between man and dog becomes blurry when one considers that both organisms have a common ancestor in the distant past. We are all cousins on the tree of life.

The view that reality should be regarded as consisting of disjoint components which needed to be studied in isolation, an approach known as reductionism, had yielded great success, culminating in Newton's powerful theories. Indeed,

given the complexity of the world, a certain amount of reductionism is unavoidable. However, as scientific developments in the 19th century were demonstrating, this can blind us to a much richer emergent structure when individual entities are considered as part of a whole. One can see this clearly if one considers how difficult it would be to deduce the myriad emergent properties of an ocean wave from examination of a single water molecule. These problems become only more difficult when one tries to understand human society.

Marx adopted what is called a dialectical approach in his work, seeking to understand the way different aspects of the world around us, such as the material, the economic, political, and cultural spheres, interacted with each other in dynamic and mutually transforming ways. He saw that the political and economic structures of our society were not permanent fixtures. Instead, they had a history. Different social structures came and went. Capitalism was just the latest one, emerging from the decaying feudal order.

Various naive idealistic explanations existed for this development - that this was part of a divine plan or an upward march of reason. Just as Darwin's theory had dispensed with these sorts of teleological explanations of the history of the natural world, Marx sought

to do likewise at the level of human society.

Consequently, Marx realised that human society could not be understood in isolation from nature. This contrasts with most of mainstream economic theory which sees the economic sphere as existing independently of the natural sphere and unconstrained by scientific laws. This artificial separation allows many economists to regard economic growth as inconsequential to the external world, treating the economy as a sort of 'perpetual motion machine' and flouting fundamental physical principles such as the laws of thermodynamics.²²

Marx grounded his theory in the material world, realising that before humans could pursue politics, art, literature or anything we would call culture, they must first interact with nature to provide food, shelter, clothing etc. From the outset, Marx argued:

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus, the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature.²³

One of Marx's concerns was the way the

new capitalist system with its increasingly exploitative and extractive practices was distorting humanity's relationship with the rest of the natural world. In this, Marx was especially influenced by the organic chemist, Justus von Liebig. In the middle of the 19th century, Liebig had worked on the very serious problem of declining rates of soil fertility in Europe. He demonstrated that as the urban populations of Europe grew, the ever-increasing transfer of food from country to city was steadily robbing the soil of its nutritional content - minerals like potassium, nitrogen, and phosphorus).

This was a simple consequence of the resulting waste products ending up as pollutants in urban rivers or the sea. An ancient cycle was being interrupted in what Marx went on to call a 'metabolic rift'. An analogous rift in the carbon cycle (which regulates our atmospheric temperature) is responsible for global warming. The notion that capitalist modes of production can strain to the point of rupture, natural cycles that are essential to life, formed a key plank in Marx' analysis. In *Capital*, Marx wrote:

Capitalist agriculture produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself.²⁴

Incidentally, the development of artificial

fertilisers (following the Haber-Bosch process of taking nitrogen from the air to produce ammonia) has allowed humanity to postpone the problem of a rift in the soil cycle, without ever healing it. In fact, excessive use of nitrogen fertiliser reduces the soil's fertility, leading to a vicious cycle of ever-increasing need and setting off another sort of metabolic rift, one which we are grappling with today. Thus, capitalism, having set in motion the greatest impetus for scientific understanding the world had ever seen, is in its application to nature, simultaneously degrading the earth at a faster rate than ever before.

The end of the 19th century also saw a significant crisis in scientific theory. Various new theories, hugely successful in their own right, contradicted each other. This led to further scientific revolutions in the early twentieth century. The resulting new theories, Relativity and Quantum Mechanics, provided challenges to our intuition the like of which we had never seen. Space and time were no longer separate phenomena forming a fixed absolute backdrop on which life played out. Instead, they formed a unified whole, space-time, which could be warped and stretched by matter and motion. Moreover, objects can behave like both particles and waves (something which seems impossible) and there are fundamental uncertainties built into our universe at the subatomic scale.

Despite defying common sense, these theories are enormously well verified, and, especially in the case of quantum mechanics, underlie much of the technology we depend on today.

Science today - the great distortion

What Marx recognised more than anyone else, was that science, and the productive forces unleashed by capitalism, have always existed in a dialectical relationship. Throughout its history, developments in scientific understanding (sometimes based only on curiosity) allowed for more powerful and efficient forms of extraction from nature. On the other hand, the needs of capitalism played a significant role in influencing the direction of research. There is an important nuance here. Scientific research, like any creative process, thrives in an environment where researchers are given freedom to ask questions and pursue interesting ideas. This is especially true of scientific education. Thus, it was and is, in the interest of capital (although not all capitalists realise this) that space be made for fundamental research without any obvious practical or profit-making motive.

What arose, and continues to the present day, is a world where scientific research takes place on a sort of spectrum. At one end, there is research directed to practical

problems, some of which require urgent solutions: for example, finding a vaccine for a deadly virus. At the other end, there is research into questions which are simply interesting or even profound, but which have no obvious practical application. Subjects like Theoretical Physics and Mathematics are full of such questions. And there is a whole range of research which is a sort of hybrid of the two. These so-called pure and applied ends of the research spectrum are both essential and in fact reinforce each other, something which many modern university executives and funding bodies seem not to understand.²⁵

94 From the mid-19th century on there was a move to professionalise science.²⁶ The importance of the scientific project both to capitalism, and to society more generally, was such that it could no longer be mainly the domain of 'Victorian gentleman scientists' or amateur enthusiasts. Today, we live in a world dominated by what is sometimes called Big Science: massive research projects involving vast numbers of scientists. The first serious example of this was the Manhattan Project where, under the direction of the brilliant theoretical physicist, Robert Oppenheimer, tens of thousands of scientists worked for three years to create the first atomic bombs. While an enormous amount of scientific research is publicly funded, science is increasingly

dominated by private corporations. It is also important to bear in mind that public or state spending on science often takes place in partnership with private industry, and that, such is the nature of the state under capitalism, that the priorities of governments themselves are heavily skewed by private interests. These interests, which are based on short-term profit making and an inherent need to grow, have a hugely distorting effect and are at the heart of the paradox outlined earlier.

The distortion of science by capitalism takes many forms. One concerns the prioritisation of certain kinds of research over others. Since the end of the Vietnam War, the United States has spent about \$3 trillion on scientific research.²⁷ More than half of this has been for military projects, maintaining the United States' position as the world's foremost imperial power. Some of this has gone toward replenishing and enhancing US nuclear capabilities. It is worth noting that, despite winning a Nobel Peace Prize after campaigning for a world free of nuclear weapons, Barack Obama and his administration pledged about \$300 billion to upgrade and replenish the US nuclear arsenal, setting in motion a \$1 trillion dollar commitment over the next two decades.²⁸ Apart from the horrific consequences we all face should these weapons ever be used, there is also the astounding waste of resources and

scientific talent.

Another form of this distortion arises in the commodification of science and the withholding of vital scientific research to protect the profits of shareholders. Never was this problem more evident than during the recent pandemic. If ever there was an event that required a combined international approach, based on cooperation and human need, and a foregoing of profiteering, it was the Covid 19 pandemic. And yet, the profiteering proceeded with gusto, while companies like Pfizer and Moderna used so-called intellectual property rights to justify their refusal to share the vaccine recipe so that inexpensive generic versions could be distributed. This is particularly sickening when one considers that the development of Covid 19 vaccines was overwhelmingly funded by states, not the private pharmaceutical companies. More than this, the scientific principles behind these vaccines, such as the concept of modification of RNA (from which the name Moderna comes) was based on decades of research at publicly funded institutions.²⁹

There have always been scientists who have fought hard to resist this distortion. Sometimes they work alone, other times, as part of organisations like the Union of Concerned Scientists. Most university academics maintain a tradition of openness and cooperation in their

research, making their results publicly available. This is something that is becoming more difficult as funding for research is increasingly linked to the interests of private capital. There are also scientists like Jonas Salk, who developed a vaccine for polio and refused to seek a patent or make any profit from his discovery. Seeing his discovery as a ‘people’s vaccine’, Salk famously compared the notion of patenting such an entity with ‘patenting the sun’.³⁰

A part of Salk’s motivation here must surely be the realisation that all of us owe an enormous debt to the countless generations who through their curiosity, toil, and inspiration, amassed a mountain of knowledge about the natural world. This knowledge is the common treasury of humankind. It is highly interconnected and every new scientific idea today, irrespective of the brilliance of the scientists involved, relies on it. The idea that private firms have a right to ignore this debt, to own scientific knowledge and profit from monopoly privileges arising from the intellectual property legislation they formulated is a moral outrage.

Of course, the warping of science to satisfy the needs of capital has consequences far beyond the corporate accumulation of wealth. The rapidly growing rift in humanity’s metabolic relationship with nature and the prospect

of destruction at the hands of technologies we have created should sound alarm calls to us all. The prospects that we may find ourselves in the world of Byron's, *The Darkness*, is a very real one. Fatalism, or a rejection of the scientific project, will not help us here.

There is always the danger of unintended consequences to any new technology. And we must, of course, guard against the sort of hubris Mary Wollstonecraft-Shelley warns us about in her classic novel. But right now, we need science more than ever. We cannot allow the inhuman priorities of a system based on individual greed and unbounded extraction to control our scientific capabilities. Instead, we need to fight against the distortion, salvaging the best of the scientific tradition to create a form of science which serves humanity.

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Climate Chaos – Their Solution and Ours

Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin

We draw close to the end of 2023 in a state of ever worsening environmental crisis. CO2 levels are now at record levels, reaching an all-time peak of 424 parts per million in May of this year.¹ We reached a global average temperature record on 3 July 2023. Antarctic sea ice was at its lowest point on record this year. On top of this, we are facing a number of potentially catastrophic tipping points that could cause runaway climate change and environmental breakdown. A Nature Communications study on the Gulf Stream estimates that a collapse could “occur around mid-century under the current scenario of future emissions. The Gulf stream, or Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC), is vital in regulating the climate system and its collapse would have “severe impacts on the climate in the North Atlantic region”.² Another tipping point is the potential fallout from methane released as a result of melting permafrost in the rapidly reducing polar ice caps. There is potential for methane gas equivalent to 205 gigatons of carbon dioxide to be released, provoking a temperature rise of up to 0.5°C.³

The melting of the ice caps is not only dangerous because of the danger for sea level rises and temperature increases as a result of methane release. The ice caps also mitigate against global warming by reflecting the light of the sun into space and preventing it from being trapped in the atmosphere. This - the ability of surfaces to reflect light - is known as the albedo. Arctic ice has a cooling effect. It reflects 50-70 percent of the sun’s light, whereas the ocean only reflects 6 percent. Should the ice caps melt, far more of the sun’s heat would be trapped in the atmosphere, provoking further warming of the earth’s oceans. This, in turn, could trigger the release of methane trapped in the seabed, resulting in further warming.

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In 2021, scientists confirmed that for the first time, the Amazon rainforest has become a net carbon emitter, emitting more carbon dioxide than it is able to absorb. Deforestation was ramped up under Bolsonaro's reign as Brazilian president, with huge emissions caused by fires which were spread to clear land for beef and soy production.⁴ The rate of deforestation has fallen significantly since Lula came to power, but simply reducing the rate at which the 'lungs of the planet' are cut down will not be enough.⁵ Deforestation must be stopped altogether and the process of restoring the Amazon must begin - and fast.

And it's not just climate change that poses an existential risk to society as we know it. Scientists report that 6 out of 9 planetary boundaries that are necessary to maintain the Earth's stability and sustainability have already been crossed.⁶ Along with climate change, these include biogeochemical flows (the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles), biosphere integrity (genetic diversity and planetary function), land system change, novel entities, and freshwater change. A seventh boundary, ocean acidification, is also in danger of being crossed.

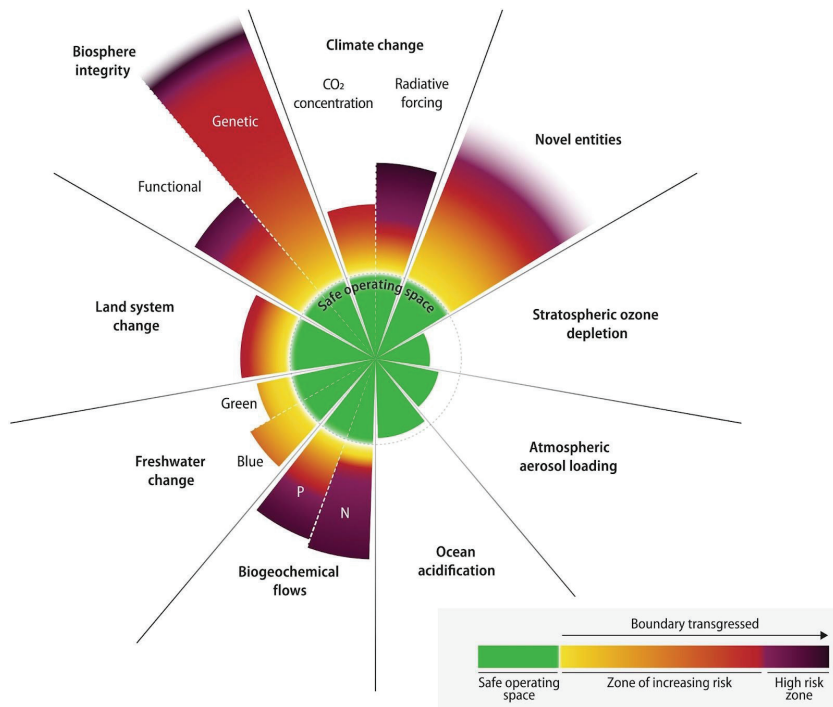


Figure 1 - Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries. *Science Advances*, 9 (37), p.2458.

The consequences of environmental breakdown are increasingly being felt around the globe. The worst of these are being inflicted on the poorest people in the Global South. In September 2023, devastating floods in Libya killed more than 4300 people and displaced thousands more. Scientists calculate that these were 50 times more likely because of climate change, with 50 percent more rain than the historical norm. The Horn of Africa is suffering a three year drought, the worst in 40 years. This has had catastrophic effects in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, with 23.4 million now acutely food insecure and 5.1 million children acutely malnourished.⁷

Although the Global North is much better equipped to deal with the fallout of environmental catastrophe, its effects are still being felt. In the United States, average annual heat-related deaths were up 95 percent in 2022 compared to 2010.⁸ In Europe, scorching heat killed over 60,000 people the same summer.⁹ At the time of writing, unprecedented floods in Cork have destroyed flood defence systems, flooding buildings like Midleton Community Hospital, where patients had to be evacuated.¹⁰ The reality predicted by scientists for decades, that most of the world's population will be unable to escape from the effects of climate change, is increasingly being borne out. Everyone will be affected, although the

poorest people - those who are least to blame for the crisis - will bear the brunt of the suffering if the current trajectory continues.

Ruling Class Strategy: From Theatre to Denialism

As the world burns, ruling classes everywhere are attempting to manage the situation so as to continue business as normal. The main strategy has been to engage in a kind of *climate theatre*, paying lip service to the crisis with grand speeches, greenwashing their image, and grandstanding over piecemeal policies that cannot possibly alter the course we are on.

This strategy is best summed up by a look at the COP summits - global meetings where the world's leaders and elites arrive by private jet to discuss how to tackle the crisis. These are increasingly saturated with fossil fuel lobbyists while climate activists are marginalised. Last year's COP27 summit was the biggest farce yet - sponsored by Coca Cola, it took place in the Sharm el-Sheikh holiday resort in Egypt, a country where thousands of people have been brutalised and locked up by the el-Sisi dictatorship for standing up for democracy and human rights.

If you thought it couldn't get any worse, you would be mistaken. COP28 is taking place in the United Arab Emirates. The

President-Designate of the summit is Sultan al Jaber, the CEO of Abu Dhabi National Oil Co., a company that has recently expanded its oil production from 4 million daily barrels to 5 million. The UAE has been campaigning to have its oil and gas recognised as clean energy, arguing that bogus, non-existent ‘carbon capture and storage’ technologies will be able to tackle its emissions.¹¹

In Europe, similar greenwashing attempts have been on show. Last year, the war in Ukraine provided the excuse for the European Parliament to pass a vote endorsing gas and nuclear as ‘green’ energies, paving the way for cheap loans and state subsidies for new projects. The NATO/EU inter-imperialist conflict with Russia and the need to remove European reliance on Russian gas was cited as the reason for the move - a stark example of how capitalist competition on a global scale means the world’s leaders are incapable of pulling the emergency brake. All the talk of a ‘green transition’ away from fossil fuels is just that - talk. Instead of an energy transition, there has been a global energy *expansion*. Nadhi Rahman explains that between 2009 and 2019, global energy demand rose by more than 20 percent. Approximately 75 percent of this demand was met by energy sources other than wind and solar.¹² Some countries are managing to reduce their emissions, but nowhere near fast enough. The global picture is one of

increased fossil fuel production, including record demand for coal in 2023.¹³

Of course, this demand is not as a result of ordinary people increasing their consumption. Ireland is a prime example of how uneven the distribution in emissions is. Irish households actually reduced their electricity usage by 9 percent last year, yet overall electricity usage is skyrocketing. These reductions have come, not as a result of a badly needed, comprehensive, state-wide retrofitting programme, but because of a cost of living crisis that has seen energy prices soaring and many poor people being forced into making a choice between heating and eating. It makes a mockery of the carbon taxes being flaunted by the Green Party as a way of forcing people to reduce their consumption - they are already doing so as much as possible. But even if this were something to celebrate, these reductions pale in comparison to the energy now being gobbled up by data centres. The proliferation of these in Ireland is staggering. Average electricity usage by data centres accounts for about 2-3 percent of overall use in most European countries. In Ireland, the figure in 2022 was 18 percent, and even if no more data centres are built, this is expected to rise to 30 percent by 2030.¹⁴

On one hand the Irish government, like those in the rest of the developed world, makes grand pledges on emission reductions. On the other, it supports policies that ensure their own climate targets cannot be met, all-the-while imposing environmental taxes on ordinary people and promoting the idea that individual action is the best way to tackle the crisis – by reducing one’s carbon footprint, for example. In December 2022 Ireland published a Climate Action Plan which pledged to reduce Irish emissions by 51 percent (from a baseline in 2018) by 2030.¹⁵ Yet far from moving steadily to meet this target, GreenHouse Gas emissions rose 9.1 percent in the first quarter of 2023 compared to 2022, having risen by 5 percent between 2020 and 2021.¹⁶ Announcing plans only to completely ignore them is likely to sow a combination of cynicism and despair, apathy and confusion, as scientists insist that transformative action must be taken immediately, while those with the power to organise this action make pledges they have no intention of keeping. We saw how the state acts when it is serious about solving a problem during Covid 19.

Covid had the potential to undermine the smooth running of the capitalist economy, forcing decision makers to spring into action. Although their strategy had many shortcomings, they did act by

using the power of the state to coordinate society-wide activity. What they didn’t do, was leave it up to the individual and hope for the best. The current targets set by the state all rely on nudging consumer behaviour rather than forcing the corporate polluters to reduce their emissions through legal sanctions. Faced with corporations that continue to drive emissions in their pursuit of profits and states that support them, it is understandable that many people take a jaundiced view of the climate crisis.

Taking individual steps like giving up a car, avoiding air travel or reducing meat consumption are morally useful actions, but the cost-benefit analysis means that they will never be a serious block on the industries affected. Corporate insiders know that while all of the costs fall on the individual, the benefits are minuscule and very difficult to observe; and so, faced with a lack of seriousness by those with power, most people get on with their lives wishing the state would act without putting the burden on working families, they fret about a future that seems predetermined, or they simply give up. The apathy that this creates helps the capitalist elites to maintain their business as normal agenda. Meanwhile, ordinary people are set up to fail leaving many feeling anxious or guilty, apathetic, or confused.

While the mainstream of western capitalism - represented by the likes of Joe Biden, Ursula Von der Leyen, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz, Micheál Martin and so on - engages in greenwashing and climate theatre, there is also a growing hard right that is leaning heavily into outright climate change denial. In recent years, this has been best represented in government by the Trump presidency in the United States and Bolsonaro's presidency in Brazil. These have both been pushed back in the electoral arena for now, but the green austerity model of the neoliberal centre has increasingly created a space for their kind of politics to fester and grow.

104 Rather than accepting any need for emission reductions, the far right wants to double down on the burning of the planet. At the core of their politics is a deep racism coupled with a full-throated 'defence of fossil capital'.¹⁷ The far right have updated conspiracy theories around 'Great Replacement' to include climate change, arguing that this is a hoax to facilitate the transfer of black and brown people into the West to replace the white population. Along with this, they have been somewhat successful in scaremongering among sections of small business owners, farmers, and workers to turn them against any kind of climate action. The 'green transition' is presented as an attack on their livelihoods, an

attack fuelled by sinister motives and bogus science.

The introduction of the Nature Restoration Law by the EU is a recent example of the kind of mild reforms that the far right seize upon and exploit. In Ireland, meetings about the issue were disrupted by people spewing conspiracy theories that had nothing to do with the content of the law. In the Netherlands, the far right Farmer-Citizen Movement has promoted and benefited from widespread farmers' protests and gained almost 20 percent of the vote. Of course, this growing support for the far right and their agitation around climate denial is only possible because of the total lack of any viable course of action from the neoliberal section of the ruling class. When it comes to farmers, neoliberal governments materially support the major agri-corporations and pay lip service to the importance of small farmers. The likes of the Green Party in Ireland argue for the urgent need to transition to more sustainable agriculture, but do not provide any viable plan that would both challenge the major agri-corporations and protect small farmers. This leaves a wide open space for the far right to capitalise on - whatever about their climate scepticism, the fact remains that the mainstream of the ruling classes wants ordinary people to pay for any transition.

Wrapped up in all of this is the attitude towards those who will suffer most from the climate crisis - the Global South and the refugees who are being increasingly displaced by climate related disasters. When it comes to refugees, the neoliberals and the far right are often singing from the same hymn sheet. In the EU, for example, the far right openly calls for refugees to be repelled from Western borders and for those who have already arrived to be sent back. But it is the mainstream of the EU that has created the vast architecture that prevents refugees from coming.

The EU's border agency, *Frontex*, has been expanded massively since it was established in 2004. Its 2023 budget was €845 million. It currently boasts 2000 staff and there are plans to increase this to 10,000 by 2027.¹⁸ *Lighthouse Reports* has exposed Frontex's complicity in illegal pushbacks performed by the Greek Coast Guard.¹⁹ In the Southern Mediterranean, it collaborates with the Libyan Coast Guard to facilitate 'pullbacks', or the prevention of departure, resulting in thousands of refugees being brought back to Libya to face forced labour, imprisonment, torture, and murder.²⁰

Another prong of the EU's strategy to 'manage migration' has been to outsource its cruelty to authoritarian regimes in Africa so that they can do its dirty work

for it. The *EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa* is used to strengthen border and police forces who, in turn, prevent refugees from leaving for Europe. Often the funds provided end up strengthening militias like the *State Support Authority* in Libya and the *Rapid Support Forces* (RSF) in Sudan. These militias have gone on to commit crimes against refugees, including atrocities like the *Khartoum massacre* on 3 June 2019, where RSF forces and the armed forces of the Sudanese Transitional Military Council massacred over 100 protesters.²¹

These brutal policies are increasingly being backed up by racist rhetoric from EU leaders. President of the EU Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, referred to Greece as 'Europe's shield' back in 2020 when Greek border guards brutally attacked migrants attempting to cross into Europe from Turkey. EU High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, had this to say last year "Europe is a garden, but most of the rest of the world is a jungle. And the jungle could invade the garden".²²

When it comes to refugees, the EU continues to implement Fortress Europe policies that far right parties might have been proud of 15 years ago. This has gone hand in hand with an increase in racist rhetoric that conjures up mental images of barbarians at the gate. This in

turn has created yet more space for more extreme far right forces to grow. As bad as mainstream Fortress Europe is, it can get worse under far right leadership. Giorgia Meloni has intensified anti-refugee policies in Italy since she came to power and cracked down on charities that attempt to rescue people in the Mediterranean. There is also the threat of fascist street forces, which create even more dangers for migrants outside of the usual state-driven repression.

The Climate Movement

Behind the different strategies of the neoliberals and the far right lies the same goal - the defence of capitalism. Wedded to a system that is based on profit, competition and the exploitation of humans and nature, they are incapable of finding any meaningful solutions. As we have seen, the climate theatre of the neoliberal centre has served to spread a feeling of profound despair among many people. We have moved beyond a period where capitalist ideology promoted its system as the best possible way of organising society, guaranteeing to improve people's lives and their standard of living. This is now largely dead in the water, replaced by the idea that 'there is no alternative'. The climate solutions of the ruling class, such as the carbon credit scam are always put forward with this ideology and framework in mind.²³ This creates even more frustration and despair - we have known for decades about the

existential crisis facing humanity, but rather than doing anything to turn the ship around, things have become increasingly worse. Consistently seeing world leaders make grand promises to act as emissions continue to rise is a recipe for demoralisation – a demoralisation that is functional for capitalism as many people lose hope that the crisis can be tackled.

All of this has a negative effect on the climate movement too. The eruption of people power movements in 2019 with the climate strikes, the rise of groups like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, has not been sustained. There are objective reasons for this - a global pandemic which meant that organising in mass numbers became very difficult, followed by war in Ukraine and a cost of living crisis. This year, there has been an uptick in mobilisations around the climate crisis, which are nowhere near the scale of 2019, but could mark the beginning of a reawakening. It is in this context that we urgently need an examination of our strategy and tactics for building an environmental movement that can win.

While the focus of this article is on the climate movement in the Global North, it should also be noted that in the Global South, in Latin America in particular, there are some greener shoots. A major mass movement led by a coalition of

Indigenous peoples, young people and activists in Ecuador has just resulted in a historic vote to halt all current and future oil drilling in the Amazon rainforest.²⁴ In Panama, new mining projects have been brought to a halt after massive street protests.²⁵ The situation is in flux - existing projects are set to continue, but so, it seems, are the protests. Likewise in Peru, an attempt by the Government to unblock investment into mining projects has been met with fierce opposition from indigenous farmers. According to José de Echave, director of the Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Peru,

“There has never been a peasant mobilisation of this magnitude in Peru, which has put a lot of pressure on mining companies.”²⁶

The situation in the Global North is quite different, although here again there are some positives. Recent action can be characterised as having two different types of campaign. On the one hand, there have been campaigns around specific issues. Among these have been strong campaigns against Shannon LNG, mining in the Sperrin’s, the pollution caused by the Aughinish Alumina plant, and more recently, the pollution in Lough Neagh. Committed activists have had some significant success in building people powered movements around these issues. For example, Shannon LNG has been pushed back - for now. The Lough Neagh campaign is in its relative infancy

but has already gathered serious momentum. All of these localised campaigns are extremely important and should be a priority for ecosocialists and environmentalists to try to build and broaden as much as possible. On the other hand, there is the more generalised activism seeking to highlight the climate crisis as a whole. This has been less successful in recent years. As mentioned above, there are objective factors at play here, but there are also subjective factors to do with the strategy and tactics of the movement.

In Ireland, for example, one of the key activist groups for building climate action has been Extinction Rebellion. Owen McCormack explained the attitude of many ecosocialists to Extinction Rebellion in a recent article.

PBP members were among the most enthusiastic in getting involved and supporting the setting up of an Irish section of Extinction Rebellion (XR). That didn’t entail subscribing to the flawed analysis of mass movements and their success as espoused by Hallam or others; it did, however, involve joining and supporting protests and actions; and actively engaging with those ideas from inside the movement.²⁷

One of the main problems with Extinction Rebellion has been the idea of

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it being ‘beyond politics’. Although this stance was often contested, it made it more difficult to formulate a coherent strategy that could win large numbers of people to action. It meant that during the height of XR mobilisations across Rebellion Week, there were a wide range of tactics used - some of them more effective than others. On the one hand, a trade union march managed to create links between XR and trade unionists, put forward slogans and demands around a just transition, and get hundreds of people marching on the streets. On the other hand, a protest against fast fashion in Penney’s was on the receiving end of a huge backlash as it was perceived - for good reason - as targeting working class and poor people who cannot afford to make ‘better choices’ when it comes to their consumption.

More recently, Just Stop Oil in Britain has been one of the groups taking action on climate. There is no doubting the principles, courage and commitment of the activists involved. They have repeatedly faced arrest and prosecution at the hands of an increasingly authoritarian British state. We should see groups like this as our allies, support them against state repression, and try to engage with them with a view to building a mass movement. However, this has to go along with an assessment of tactics and strategy, and in this regard, there are flaws in the approach of Just Stop Oil. A

lot of the actions that have garnered attention have been slow marches in front of cars, often in small enough numbers. Rather than directly targeting the government or the major polluting corporations, they have often prevented or delayed people as they try to go to work. The effect of these tactics has been to create anger among working class people - some of these marches have even been attacked by workers who are trying to get to work.

Moreover, there doesn’t appear to be an attempt to win working class people to any wider set of demands outside of ‘stopping oil’. At a time when workers and poor people are in the midst of a massive cost of living crisis, this is more than missing a trick. It misses the opportunity to connect the climate crisis with the suffering of ordinary people and put forward proposals that could tackle both. Some of these issues arise out of a generalised problem in the environmental movement - the question of how and where change can come from. This is by no means an easy question. Decades into what often seems like an intractable crisis, it would be arrogant for anyone to say that they have the definitive answers. There are things we can say about the general orientation of the movement, however, including how a Marxist perspective might help to move things forward.

In general, the movement has largely moved on from calls for generalised action, with no real distinction between ordinary people and the powerful. What we now have among activist circles is an approach that seeks to put pressure on governments to take action. Through non-violent protest and direct action, appeals are made to the world's leaders to 'listen to the science' and take the necessary action.

The problem is that the world's leaders, tied as they are to the capitalist system, are simply not going to do what is necessary. At this point, they have proved they cannot and will not be the agents of change - we need to look elsewhere.

One response to this problem has come from Andreas Malm with his book, *How to Blow up a Pipeline*.²⁸ Malm makes a good critique of Extinction Rebellion's idea of maintaining non-violence as a principle, exposing the logic of 'Gandhian non-violence' as being against the violence of ordinary people, but quite comfortable with the violence of the state. However, there are also problems with the kind of economic sabotage he argues for as an alternative. This would be performed, not by mass movements, but by small groups of the most committed activists. The aim of this sabotage, according to Malm, is to make it impossible for the ruling class to continue with the capitalist model and to

force them to look at alternatives. But as John Molyneux points out:

Malm's argument explicitly points to a major problem with this strategy: would any number of dramatic actions, no matter how spectacular or militant, be enough to get the existing capitalist state to sever its ties to capital, ties that have been developed over centuries and are deeply embedded in all its structures? Would even blowing up ten pipelines or blocking fifty major bridges be enough to bring this about? I think the answer to these questions is clearly 'No'.²⁹

Ultimately, the logic of Malm's strategy is similar to the logic of non-violent protest. In this case, instead of appealing to the capitalist class to do the right thing, the aim is to force them into reconsidering. Ultimately, it is the capitalist state that is expected to carry out the transition, albeit under duress. In this case, moreover, we can expect to see an extreme reaction - heavy repression and many activists being put in jail.

This has already happened for the non-violent protesters of Just Stop Oil, along with an ideological assault to demonise them. And if we are relying on a small number of committed activists to take these actions, it won't take very long to behead the movement. The question

follows: if neither of these approaches provides an adequate strategy, how can we chart a course out of the crisis?

The Working Class

Talk of the working class as the agent of change has been downplayed in some leftist and academic circles for some time.³⁰ On one hand, this is understandable. In the West, certainly, it has been decades since there was the serious possibility of a rupture in the capitalist system, driven by the power of workers. Various theorists argue that the nature of the capitalist system and its exploitation of workers has changed, or that we are now in a new period of “techno feudalism”.³¹

I want to argue that although it has developed and looks very different to what it was when Marx first wrote about it, the capitalist system is still fundamentally divided between two competing classes - an exploiting class and an exploited class. Capitalism still runs on the exploitation of workers and nature, creating an ongoing struggle that will continue until capitalism ends. This can be seen most clearly in the fact that wealth inequality has grown exponentially over the past few decades as wages have remained stagnant, and the cost of living continues to rise. Productivity has increased significantly but this increase has not been reflected in

wages. There has therefore been an increase in the rate of exploitation, which has allowed capitalism to continue to grow and function, even if it is not in such a healthy state anymore. At the same time, the global working class has grown massively and is now bigger than it has ever been. As John Molyneux wrote in 2018:

When Marx wrote the *Manifesto* in 1848 [the working class] existed only in Northwestern Europe (and a little in America) and numbered about 20 million, now it numbers approximately 1.5 billion and exists in large masses on every continent and in almost every country in the world.³²

Not only has the working class expanded across the world, but it has diversified from the largely white, male class of workers it was in Europe in the 1800s. There is a huge industrial working class now in countries like China, India, the United States and elsewhere. There has been a feminisation of the class with women joining the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Other professions which previously would have involved much more autonomy for the worker have become proletarianised - for example, teachers, junior doctors, and taxi drivers.

Does this mean that a working class revolution is inevitable? Absolutely not. But the objective situation remains that if workers get organised and fight back, they have the capacity to shut down the levers of capitalism, take over the economy, and run it themselves on the basis of restoring the balance between humanity and nature instead of profit.

Nobody could look at the workers movement now, after decades of neoliberal assault and compromise by trade union leaders and argue that this is just around the corner. But if we accept that the potential to change the world lies with workers as the main agent of change, this should affect our orientation. The demands of the climate movement ought to relate to the hardships workers and poor people are facing. Climate demands must also be cost of living demands.

For example, in Ireland there is a dire need for a retrofitting programme, done by the state, on the scale of what was done with electrification through the ESB. A state-owned company could retrofit our housing stock at cost, not for profit. This, in turn, would see people's energy bills fall, their health improve, and emissions decline. Free public transport - now a reality in many European cities - must be at the forefront of our demands. Rather than outsourcing renewable energy production to private

companies, a state-owned renewable energy company needs to be set up to produce energy for people's needs, not for profit. Likewise, a four day working week without any loss of earnings would have a hugely positive impact on people's lives and would also result in a significant drop in emissions. We also need to move away from a corporate agricultural model that prioritises the profits of a small few, while small farmers are put under increasing pressure to produce more for diminishing incomes. The class divide in agriculture must be recognised here. When it comes to the major agri-corporations, these need to be challenged and broken up. On the other hand, small and medium farmers must be incentivised to transition away from beef and dairy to sustainable farming methods - this should result in an improvement, not a diminishing of, their living standards.

Along with these demands, we need a general *orientation* towards workers. Along with putting forward positive demands, climate activists should look to support workers in their struggles, whether these are about pay, pensions, or other working conditions. If this happens, climate activists will be on a much better footing down the line to argue for climate strikes in the real sense of the word - actual work stoppages and pickets being set up based around putting forward demands for climate action. Ecosocialists

should therefore argue within their trade unions to step up their action around the climate crisis. Capital has taken the lion's share of the value created over recent decades, but it is also the beneficiary of a business model that is destroying our environment. Action by trade unions must reflect the fact that working people are losing now and it must include solidarity with the poor and with those generations not yet born.

There is also a real need to build mass mobilisations on the street, along with direct action. But ecosocialists must argue in the movement for these to have clear demands and clear targets - governments and the major corporate polluters who are benefiting from the destruction of the planet.

At this point, a certain amount of environmental destruction is locked in. We will not be able to stop climate catastrophe, given that it is already more or less in full swing. However, the movements we build now will give us a chance to prevent the worst outcomes, and should we succeed in a rupture with capitalism, what we do now will define the manner in which a future, more humane, sustainable society can be built.

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Seán O'Casey: Political Activist and Writer

Paul O'Brien

Seán O'Casey gave a voice to those who are rarely heard: the poor, the dispossessed, the tenement-dwellers, whose lives he shaped into works of art. Their very presence on the stage is their claim to justice and a better future. He was a socialist, a humanist and an exceptional writer who put politics at the centre of his work, insisting that the writer can be a transformative force in society. Exiled to England at the age of forty-six, O'Casey sent his blasts and benedictions across the world for the rest of his life. As Richard Watts has pointed out, however, 'his anger was based, not on his dislike for mankind, but on his love for it'.¹ Dismissing his political beliefs does O'Casey an enormous disservice as a writer and a human being. O'Casey was one of the most political writers of his generation, constantly exploring the frontiers between literature and politics. Like his friend, George Bernard Shaw, O'Casey wrote for a purpose. His life reflects the history of the early twentieth century, a period shaped by two great political ideals: nationalism and socialism. History and politics were woven into the fabric of his life – they gave him focus and shaped him as an artist.

A sympathetic reading of O'Casey's drama illustrates how his own lived experience animated his concerns with political, social, and moral issues. James Larkin, the Irish trade union leader, had a profound effect on O'Casey. Larkin, who came to Dublin in 1907 on his 'divine mission of discontent',² inspired O'Casey to use words as weapons in the fight against poverty and oppression. But it was his own experience as a labourer, underfed and exploited, that heightened his interest in socialism. O'Casey believed that his participation in the Dublin lockout of 1913 ranked as his finest moment.

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Seán O’Casey was born in Dublin in 1880 at 85 Upper Dorset Street and lived in a small enclave just north of the river Liffey for the first forty-six years of his life. His family were Protestant and supporters of the British connection. Despite his family’s unionist connections, O’Casey joined the Gaelic League and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) sometime around 1903, working tirelessly for the nationalist movement for the next ten years of his life. O’Casey was an unlikely member of the Gaelic League as few working class Protestants joined. Being the great scholar that he was, he soon became proficient and, over time, a first-rate Irish speaker. The dilemma confronting O’Casey during his time in the Gaelic League and the IRB was how to hitch the plough to the stars, or, at a more basic level, to put a loaf of bread on the worker’s table as well as a vase of flowers. He eventually broke with the nationalist movement over their failure to support the workers during the lockout in 1913. How it must have rankled with O’Casey to hear about a worker sacked, or a family evicted while in the strike headquarters at Liberty Hall during the afternoon, and later that evening to be in the company of the offending landlord or employer at some nationalist event as they loudly denounced the British presence in Ireland. Nearly all of O’Casey’s biographers agree that the

lockout was the one genuinely transformative event in his life.

Politics and drama

If artistically, Shakespeare and Boucicault inspired the young O’Casey, Bernard Shaw transformed his view of drama and politics. In 1912, Kevin O’Loughlin, a member of the St Laurence O’Toole Club, urged O’Casey to read Bernard Shaw’s *John Bull’s Other Island*, insisting that the play would ‘make a new man’ of him.³ Despite his limited reading of Shaw at this stage of his life, Shaw’s writings quickly helped O’Casey to clarify his thinking on the national question and socialism during the momentous events of 1913. In a letter in 1938, he said it was ‘the preaching of Jim Larkin and the books of Bernard Shaw that swung him over to the left’.⁴ He learned his trade as a writer in the publications of the nationalist movement and in the pages of Larkin’s paper, *The Irish Worker*. Writing about working class affairs, he gradually fused the literary tradition of John Mitchel, James Fintan Lalor and Shakespeare with the King James Bible and the hard-edged demands of the socialist movement into a literary weapon deployed for open class warfare. If the Gaelic League had educated O’Casey in grammar and syntax, Larkin gave him his revolutionary subject.

O'Casey had a long apprenticeship as a writer before his first play *The Shadow of a Gunman* was produced at the Abbey in 1923. The Abbey audience enjoyed the irony and comedic qualities of the play as it suited the mood of a country grown tired of death and war. Produced one year later, *Juno and the Paycock*, began to shake O'Casey's audiences out of their complacency about the past, but it was in *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), that he plunged a dagger deep into the heart of the myth of heroic sacrifice so central to Irish Republicanism. For a section of the audience, this was a step too far. While respecting O'Casey as a great dramatist, Peadar O'Donnell was just one of many republicans who were bitter about O'Casey's work: 'His Plough and the Stars I find nauseating. There is nothing in this play from which any revolutionary action could proceed.'⁵ A modern critic, James Moran, writing in the same vein, suggests that it was written from an ultra left perspective 'to denigrate the Rising' and that it was 'a cynical attack on 1916.'⁶

Through his work, O'Casey demanded that people look at the reality of what had been achieved for all the talk of 'blood sacrifice' and 'romantic Ireland'. Pearse or Connolly could not be blamed for the conservatism and backwardness, economically and socially, of the Free State, as they had never envisaged such

an outcome. However, O'Casey did fault those who came after them for promoting the cult of sacrifice and romantic nationalism that overwhelmed the social and economic demands of the revolution. In *The Plough and the Stars*, O'Casey also turned the conventions of the historic play inside out in a way that went beyond formal innovation. He summoned his characters from the margins of history and placed them in the spotlight while the great men and women of history were confined to the wings. The looting scene in *The Plough and the Stars* caused offence to many in the audience as it appeared to demean the ideals of the rebels. Looting was widespread, and O'Casey was right to include that aspect of the rising. However, the scene can also be construed as an intimation of what 1916 should also have been about, namely the expropriation of the Irish capitalist class. This underlying, but never overt, socialist theme develops as the play progresses. The petty squabbling is cast aside. A sense of them and us develops – of community, of solidarity – and a politicisation of the tenement dwellers, while unstated is, nevertheless, implicit in the play's ending.

The starting point for any political critique of the Dublin plays is to accept that O'Casey was presenting the 1916 Rising and the subsequent War of Independence as the historical development of the 1913 lockout.

O'Casey was attempting to reflect the reality of the newly independent Free State. Nationalism had failed to deliver for the masses on the potential for radical social advancement that the working-class struggle of 1913, the socially progressive content of the 1916 Proclamation, and the Democratic Programme of 1919 had all envisaged. Seán O'Faoláin is one of the few critics who understood with the utmost precision what O'Casey was suggesting in the Dublin Plays; 'Seán O'Casey's plays are thus an exactly true statement of the Irish Revolution whose flag should be, not the tricolour, but the plough and the stars of the labouring classes.'⁷ When in 1928, W.B. Yeats rejected O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie*, it led to an irrevocable breakdown in relations between O'Casey and the Abbey. O'Casey, by now living in England, never wrote another play for the Abbey.

Rise o' the Red Star

In the late 1930s, O'Casey described Moscow as 'a flame to light the way of all men towards the people's ownership of the world'.⁸ Moscow was just the final stop on an intellectual journey that had commenced long before the Abbey accepted his first play. O'Casey was aware of the revolutionary developments in Russia in 1917 and beyond. He was a member of the Socialist Party of Ireland

and took an active part in the agitation in support of the Russian Revolution. He recalled how he raised 'his voice at the Dublin meetings, held to protest against the interference waged by the Great Powers in order to down the struggling Revolution'.⁹ Despite the rise of Stalinism in the late 1920s, and the show trials of the old Bolshevik leadership, which destroyed all vestiges of worker's control in the USSR, O'Casey supported the USSR up to the time of his death in 1964.

The rise of fascism in the 1930s and especially the Spanish Civil War also had a profound effect on O'Casey. In a letter to his publisher in November 1936, he wrote, 'I am praying to God that the Spanish Communists may win.'¹⁰ He responded to the political and economic crisis of the 1930s and 40s by writing a series of plays that Jack Mitchell has termed his 'revolution plays': *The Star Turns Red*, *Purple Dust* and *Red Roses for Me*.¹¹ *The Star Turns Red* (1939) was his literary contribution to the fight against fascism in Spain and Germany and significantly in Ireland as well. In a letter, he spelt out his purpose in writing the play: 'Star Turns Red was of course, a curse on the Nazi-Fascist powers; plus, the attempt to form the "Blueshirts" in Ireland.'¹² The play depicts the world of the 1930s, where the centre had politically dissolved, and the options facing humanity were either socialism or

barbarism. *The Star Turns Red* was O'Casey's most trenchant literary statement on communism, fascism, and the Catholic Church's support for Franco, with walk-on parts for Paddy Belton's Christian Front and the Blueshirts in Ireland.¹³ O'Casey described the play as 'a confession of faith'.¹⁴ There is no ambiguity in this clash of ideologies; he is clear about which side he supports.

Literature and politics

All great works of art or literature must be assessed primarily on their artistic merit; that is the function of aesthetics. However, any discussion of Seán O'Casey's drama inevitably breaks out of the realm of aesthetics and into the realm of politics. Many of his post-colonial critics insist that 'O'Casey never sees or at least never presents any understanding of the important role played by nationalist ideology' in Irish politics.¹⁵ But that is precisely what O'Casey was warning about – how nationalism had dominated Irish politics to the exclusion of class politics, and the negative outcomes associated with this. Declan Kiberd writes about the post-revolutionary disillusionment that is at the heart of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. Kiberd defends the republican tradition by suggesting that O'Casey's point was that 'nationalism rather than

real republicanism has triumphed, and with it the self-interest of the propertied class'.¹⁶ Kiberd suggested that this is 'O'Casey's darkest play', one that lays bare all that is wrong with the world, but that O'Casey is less clear in implying what he stands for. O'Casey exposes the irrelevance of the nationalists and the impotency of the workers, but he never takes it one step further to 'raise questions about the entire social system which gives rise to such blindness'.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, there are problems with some political aspects of the Dublin plays; O'Casey was not rigorous enough in measuring up to the exacting questions raised in the plays about the outcome of that exciting decade, but his plays did, at least, undermine the smug confidence of conservative nationalism.

International standing

In the 1950s and 60s, as the English-speaking world turned away from O'Casey, German productions added to his reputation and consolidated his position as an innovative writer of international standing.¹⁸ Because of their shared political perspectives, Bertolt Brecht particularly welcomed O'Casey's work, specifically exploring how his post-Dublin drama could be staged. The radical tradition of Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, combined with the technical abilities of German theatre,

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meant that they were able to highlight the way O'Casey integrated the tragic and the comic to explore human relations on a more personal level. *Purple Dust*, which was staged by the Berliner Ensemble in 1966, showed O'Casey's stagecraft at its best. Hans-Georg Simmgen suggested these productions were a development of the 'creative and critical element of Brecht's theatre work'.¹⁹ This work showed O'Casey as one of the most innovative and thoughtful dramatists of the twentieth century. Over one hundred productions of his work, mainly in East Germany, were staged during that time, and it is interesting to reflect on his struggle to develop a synthesis between politics, form, and content that paralleled European developments in drama. Like Brecht, O'Casey set himself against 'Tragic Theatre' because he believed that 'nothing human can possibly be outside the powers of humanity'.²⁰ Perhaps 'optimistic tragedy' is a better description of his work; inherent in the death or defeat of his working class heroes and antiheroes is the possibility of progress.²¹

Theoretically, his contribution to the debate on the relationship between literature and politics was slight, but a selection of his essays on the theatre, collected in two books published after his death, are still of interest.²² They reflect his attempt to develop both a form and a technique that was in step with the

changing historical context and the range of content matter he dealt with during his career. O'Casey understood more than most of his generation that 'art never follows a flag'.²³ Ireland was for him an endless conflict of love and hate, of fulfilment and failure. Indeed, it was his relation to the conflicts of the early 20th century that makes his work so interesting, and at times, so contradictory. Unlike his friend, the Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid, O'Casey could never be accused of painting nationalism red. To avoid the sentimental image of Ireland peddled by the remnants of the Irish Literary Revival, he tried to link his later work to the modernist developments in European theatre.

Debates on culture

The debates over the relationship between literature and politics, the role played by culture within a capitalist society, and the moral duty of a writer in an epoch of extreme crisis were issues that exercised the progressive movement during the 1930s. Unfortunately, the debate became polarised between those who supported the cultural policy of the Soviet Union under Stalin and those who believed that while art should and must respond to the historical and social context of its time, artistic production must also be allowed a high degree of autonomy. Alick West, a former student of Trinity College Dublin, wrote of the

tension between culture and propaganda that dominated much of the debate in the 1930s. In his autobiography, commenting on this relationship, West wrote what is perhaps the best summary of that debate:

In this sense it was true that culture is a weapon in the fight for socialism. But the truth depended on recognition of the greater truth that socialism is a weapon in the fight for culture. For our final aim was not the establishment of a political and economic structure, but the heightening of human life. Without this recognition, the slogan becomes a perversion of the truth since it degraded culture into a means to a political end.²⁴

O'Casey, to his credit, stood with dramatists such as Ernst Toller, a socialist, who declared that 'as a writer I speak to all who are prepared to listen, regardless of what party or group they belong to. The idea is more important to me than the slogan'.²⁵ Over the last one hundred years or so, the relationship between politics and art has been a contentious and challenging issue for political activists offering critical responses to a work of art. Where does the balance lie between a political assessment of a work of art and an aesthetic one? The difficulty with a response that judges art through the politics of the artist, as was favoured by

sections of the left from the 1930s onwards, is that several of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, such as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, were politically on the right and in some cases supporters of fascism. A more nuanced view understood that their political opinions may have diminished the individual, but not the work. A second complication is that a great deal of modernist writing does not lend itself to a political reading because of the way it rejects historicism or causality, emphasising instead, the importance of experimentation with form and language, symbolism, and the distorted reality behind the outward appearance.

O'Casey hated the 'boy meets tractor' style of writing that emerged from the USSR in the 1930s. He refused to be dictated to about what he could or should write, and perhaps this is why he never joined the Communist Party. Any attempt to silence his fellow writers and artists, whether the attack came from the right or the left, was fiercely resisted by O'Casey. His condemnation of the 'concrete shelter' style of Soviet literature in 1946 was as forceful as anything published at the time: 'There isn't any doubt in my mind that the concrete shelter is as bad as the ivory tower; worse, in fact, for the ivory tower keeps in faint touch with present life, but the walls of a concrete shelter are too thick to hear even a

whisper of it.’²⁶ O’Casey always understood that his political involvement was a civic or moral duty and the writing of drama was his vocation. His concept was not art as propaganda, but politics as a vision of a new way of life that could be captured in his art. In all his work, after he left Ireland, he attempted to defend the values of spontaneity, experimentation, artistic quality, and the writer’s independence from dogma. In other words, his work was in no sense an instrument of propaganda for this or that political ideology or party but was something that had an innate connection to the fate of humanity and an active and committed attachment to its place and time.

Summary

Paul Kerryson, who directed the Dublin trilogy in 1992 in England, expressed doubts about the post-Dublin plays: ‘His later plays showed him to be ahead of his time, but I don’t think they have anything in particular to say today.’²⁷ Other dramatists who looked at the totality of his work saw it differently; Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney and John Livings in Britain, Arthur Miller and Lorraine Hansberry in America, Augusto Boal in Brazil, Brendan Behan, John Arden, Roddy Doyle and the Sheridan brothers at the Project Theatre in Dublin, provide evidence to the contrary. Brian Friel spoke for a generation when writing

about O’Casey: ‘We all came out from under his overcoat.’²⁸ Production techniques have caught up with O’Casey’s imagination, and a new generation of directors and actors are exploring the underlying potential of his work, freed from the burden of history that has dominated, and in some cases overwhelmed, productions in the recent past. Directors are taking a fresh look at O’Casey, reinterpreting the plays rather than presenting them as traditional classics of the stage. The ANU Theatre Group’s production of *The Lost O’Casey* in 2018 reframed O’Casey’s one-act play from 1924, *Nannie’s Night Out*, as an unflinching examination of motherhood, addiction, and Dublin’s chronic housing crisis in a contemporary setting that points to a possible way forward for future productions or adaptations of these neglected plays.²⁹ In *The Lost O’Casey*, ANU channelled their rage against poverty and injustice in the spirit of O’Casey, but with a decidedly twenty-first-century edge. Both O’Casey’s 1924 production of *Nannie’s Night Out* and ANU’s 2018 *The Lost O’Casey*: ‘forced audience members out of their comfort zone by confronting them with what they would prefer not to see: the unsettling reality of lives lived on the streets and behind the doors of tenement rooms or council flats’.³⁰

O’Casey was uniquely placed to write about the working class because, almost

alone among his literary generation, his background in the north Dublin tenements gave him access to that world. He created working class characters that we now take for granted. O'Casey also cut across the concept of the 'great men of history', who shape the world around them by their actions. In a piece in the New York Times in 1950, O'Casey reflected on *The Plough and the Stars*:

If it has any 'significance' it is that a small number – or even one fine mind – may initiate a movement but cannot bring it to success without the cooperation of what is called 'the common people'. The gallant men who rose in 1916 to strike for Ireland's independence were defeated, and what they stood for only succeeded when, years later, the people as a whole swung around from opposition to support.³¹

If Brecht and his contemporaries articulated the capacity of modern urban men and women to throw off the concept of bourgeois individualism in favour of egalitarianism, O'Casey articulated the position of the Irish working class left behind by the historical failures of Irish nationalism. O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, written in the post-revolutionary period, explores the same dynamic as Toller's *Masses and Man* or Kaiser's *Gas II*, which registered the disillusionment they felt following the failure of the German

Revolution at the end of the First World War and the collapse of their expectations and hopes.³² When the German revolutionary, Karl Liebknecht, defended the failed socialist revolution in 1919 by suggesting that 'there were defeats that were victories'; he could have been writing about the 1916 Rising. Liebknecht went on to say that there were also 'victories that were more fatal than defeats'.³³ For Seán O'Casey and many others, the narrow-minded conservative state that emerged following the War of Independence and the Civil War was a 'victory' that felt like a defeat.

Endnotes

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Commodity Feminism in Barbieland

Rosa Bargmann

For what reason, should the woman worker seek a union with the bourgeois feminists? Who, in actual fact, would stand to gain in the event of such an alliance? Certainly not the woman worker. She is her own saviour; her future is in her own hands. The working woman guards her class interests and is not deceived by great speeches about the “world all women share”. The working woman must not and does not forget that while the aim of bourgeois women is to secure their own welfare in the framework of a society antagonistic to us, our aim is to build, in the place of the old, outdated world, a bright temple of universal labour, comradely solidarity and joyful freedom.¹

Alexandra Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*, first published as a pamphlet in 1909.

The commercial success and pervasiveness with which Barbie has entered the cultural zeitgeist is undeniable. As of October 2023, Barbie has made approximately \$1.44 billion internationally, making it the highest grossing film of 2023. Additionally, it is the highest grossing film by a female director ever, the highest grossing film ever released by Warner Bros., and the 14th highest grossing film of all time. The film’s impact on sales for Mattel has also surpassed the expectations of analysts, who predicted a large increase in revenue after the release of this film/marketing campaign.

According to their estimates, ‘Sales grew 9.3 percent to \$1.92 billion, exceeding projections of \$1.84 billion, as shoppers snapped up Barbie dolls and other mainstays like Hot Wheels cars.’ Mattel has devoted a new section of its online merchandise store to products related to the Barbie film where consumers (or more likely their parents or guardians) are able to purchase a wide array of Barbie themed products, from dolls of the main characters in different outfits to the pink Corvette Convertible that Barbie drives in the film. Much like in the narrative of the film, Barbie has given herself (and the brand she represents) a complete make-over, she has seemingly transcended her previous self, both in aesthetics and in character. Indeed, Barbie has come to be considered a symbol of women’s liberation in popular culture, from patriarchy and sometimes, surprisingly, even from capitalism. It is impossible to deny the impact of the Barbie movie. But what does the film really impart to the audience about the condition of women in contemporary society?

The world of Barbieland

In terms of its presentation, the world of Barbieland is decidedly appealing with its intricately manicured lawns, stylishly

dressed inhabitants and vibrant shades of colour, mostly ranging from bubble gum to the hot pink typically associated with the brand. The major characters also frequently change their outfits to facilitate the real world production of new Barbie dolls immediately available in your local store. Despite its glossy and whimsical aesthetics, however, it immediately becomes evident that Barbie considers itself a work of political fiction, and a progressive one at that. Indeed, as prominent reactionary commentator, Benjamin Shapiro, laments in his YouTube video titled ‘Ben Shapiro DESTROYS The Barbie Movie For 43 Minutes’, the word ‘patriarchy’ is uttered a total of ten times during the film’s runtime.

Greta Gerwig’s movie follows the journey of Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie) from childlike and innocent girlhood to what the film considers to be mature womanhood. On her path, Barbie encounters multiple challenges that are a real part of women and girls’ socialisation process. As a real girl would, Barbie experiences the changes that puberty makes to a girl’s body as well as to her mind. She becomes sad and realizes her own mortality, suddenly develops morning breath and cellulite,

128 leading to a significant identity crisis that provides the catalyst to the film's main narrative. To tackle these supposed flaws, Barbie must leave Barbieland – with its female dominated social roles and go to the real world – a world that is ruled by men, representative of modern society. When she arrives, Barbie duly experiences sexual harassment and infantilisation by men, unrealistic expectations towards women in terms of looks and behaviour and is forced to navigate a fundamentally misogynistic world in which women are disadvantaged simply for being women. There is even a nod towards discrimination against women in the corporate world when it is stated that Mattel has only had one female CEO in the history of the company while the board of directors depicted in the film consists entirely of men. The film also touches on the fact that the inventor of the original Barbie doll, Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman) who also features in a brief cameo appearance, was not historically credited for her work and ideas.

The assertion that young girls can be anything they dream of until they are thwarted by systemic misogyny is a clever idea, but the film does not fundamentally address the reality that

misogyny and gendered oppression are a necessary byproduct of capitalism. Misogyny cannot be analysed or even abolished by itself, and the movie often feeds into tired stereotypes. For example, although the film addresses the fact that Margot Robbie is a flawed casting choice to make a point about the harm that lies in dictating a very rigid idea of female conventional attractiveness, they still cast her in the leading role; while all of the other variations, except Weird Barbie (Kate McKinnon) would conventionally be regarded as young and attractive - even if the film makes it explicit that older women should be considered beautiful too. The film also relies on a biological essentialist view of women when genuinely progressive filmmakers past and present have challenged the rigidly fixed taxonomies of gender and the reactionary political dangers inherent in such reductionist conceptions of womanhood. While Barbieland features a wide variety of skin tones, body types and professions - and even a Barbie played by transgender actress Hari Nef- Stereotypical Barbie only truly becomes a woman when she proudly proclaims her scheduled appointment with her gynaecologist. Where adolescent Stereotypical Barbie was once without genitals, she has now, through the

process of coming into womanhood acquired a vagina. The unfortunate implication lingers that one is required to have a vagina to be a woman. This reduction to genitalia as the all-important marker of womanhood appears flimsy at best, misogynistic at worst.

Commodity Feminism

From the outset, the various Barbies' matriarchal domination over the various Kens (in *Barbieland*), as well as the individuality of each Barbie is dependent on their consumer behaviour, their appearance, as well as their chosen profession. Stereotypical Barbie is principally distinguished from the other Barbies by her wide selection of particularly feminine clothing, her luxurious pink Dreamhouse complete with a waterslide and her pink Corvette Convertible. She is thus fundamentally defined by what she owns rather than who she is. Indeed, whenever Barbie hits a major turning point in her narrative arc, an outfit change immediately seems to follow as the most visible sign of the shift in the story. This phenomenon is characterised aptly in the concept of commodity feminism identified by Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath and Sharon L. Smith, who argue that "rather

than fight the legitimacy of feminist discourse, advertisers have attempted to turn aspects of that discourse into semiotic markers that can be attached to commodity brand names.² Thus, the idea of feminism™, newly attached to the Barbie brand, can be moulded into a symbol of feminism, even if the brand had previously only been associated by the general public with little girls playing dress up.

One way the movie achieves this is to turn their own corporate desire for brand diversification into a sense of the possibilities available to women. We are introduced to Lawyer Barbie (Sharon Rooney), Physicist Barbie (Emma Mackey), Writer Barbie (Alexandra Shipp), Doctor Barbie (Hari Nef) and, of course, President Barbie (Issa Rae) to name only a few. The implication is that young girls can be whoever they choose, while the audience are encouraged to buy into this form of commodity feminism by buying as many different Barbies as possible for their daughters. The idea that Barbie equals a commitment to feminism was also strengthened by the conservative backlash, which ironically made the brand appear as a disruptive symbol of opposition to the right's rejection of supposedly feminist media.

But this is to neglect the film's biggest weakness – its simplistic, but also flawed sense of what women's liberation actually entails.

A flawed conception of liberation

Barbie fails to establish a legitimate road to liberation for two related reasons. Firstly, the film implies that women need only realise their oppression to liberate themselves as if a lack of consciousness is the primary limiting factor, not the overthrow of oppressive social structures. Secondly, it assumes that malicious and sexist men are the problem rather than capitalist social structures that exploit the rest of humanity and fuel gendered oppression. Ken initially plays second fiddle in Barbieland reflecting the attitude of young girls to their Ken dolls. But having escaped to the real world and realised the power that men hold there; he returns to transform Barbieland into its misogynistic equivalent. Two points are worth noting as Ken sets about taking over Barbieland. The first is that the Barbies are depicted as gullibly simple, as it is merely by telling them that they are inferior that the Kens usher in their new rule over them. Secondly, Stereotypical Barbie's state of being depends so much on her possessions that she only really becomes aware of her

new subjugated role when Stereotypical Ken takes away her Dreamhouse and throws out her clothes and shoes.

When this happens, a minority of enlightened Barbies band together in a ritual to magically educate all of the other brainwashed Barbies out of their state of subjugation. Once they have learned who their enemy is, they pit the Kens against each other as romantic rivals to distract them from a democratic vote to restore Barbieland to its previous matriarchal system of governance - with the previously noted President Barbie back at the top of the hierarchy. Liberation from oppression is thus merely one critical thought and one referendum away from being realised for all women. Once the Barbies have been restored to their original positions of power, moreover, patriarchy ceases to exist – but in its place is the original system of hierarchy and subordination as the men and the women merely change places.

Genuine liberation for women means liberation for all from systems of oppression, including those rooted in gender, not merely the replacement of men at the top of an unjust hierarchy.

As Kollontai writes,

[Proletarian women] do not see men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future. The woman and her male comrade are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hated chains of capitalism that oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life.³

It must be a collective project to liberate all from systems of gendered oppression. Any movement that does not recognize this fact is doomed to failure. Women's liberation is not simply a question of false consciousness and cannot be voted in over the heads of individual men. Neither is it a question of appointing female instead of male CEOs, presidents, or judges. Ultimately it is the undemocratic system of bourgeois class rule mediated through the capitalist economy and occasional elections, that keeps women in their subjugated position, not the individual Kens of this world. Since capitalism cannot function without the unpaid and unappreciated reproductive labour of women, especially

women of colour and women from the Global South, the subjugation of women is a prerequisite for the maintenance and preservation of the capitalist system. As Nancy Fraser aptly puts it in an interview for the New York Times: 'feminism is not simply a matter of getting a smattering of individual women into positions of power and privilege within existing social hierarchies. It is rather about overcoming those hierarchies. This requires challenging the structural sources of gender domination in capitalist society[...]'⁴ Unfortunately, none of this is possible, let alone visible in a movie created by a capitalist firm to sell more dolls through a clever story and the weaponisation of nostalgia.

Conclusion

Though sporadically touching on relevant contemporary issues of gendered oppression, *Barbieland* remains steadfastly removed from the world of real working women and thus remains what it purports to be - a fantasy. In the end, the film is a product of the culture industry in capitalism,⁵ and thus cannot transcend the conditions under which it was produced: a system built to maximise the profitability of art, meticulously constructed to be just progressive enough to appeal to a

mainstream audience largely consisting of young women and girls, whilst never fundamentally challenging the system under which these people are oppressed.

One positive effect of the film's release has been that basic questions of feminism have once again broken into popular discourse. It is simple enough for teenagers to understand its messaging and provides an easily understandable, if flawed idea of patriarchy. In the end however, it is weighed down by its bourgeois feminist approach to women's liberation and its commercial mandate to popularise Matell's key merchandise. Ideally, the film will provide a new generation of young women with a starting point in progressive education; a lens into the conditions under which women live and a steppingstone to a solution that rises above that offered in the film.

Endnotes

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⁴ Gary Gutting and Nancy Fraser. 2015. *A Feminism Where 'Lean In' Means Leaning On Others*, New York, New York Times Archive.

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Book Review

The Ghost Limb: Alternative Protestants and the Spirit of 1798

Claire Mitchell

Beyond The Pale Books

Jim Larmour

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Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight?

Who blushes at the name?

When cowards mock the patriot's fate,

Who hangs his head in shame?

The above poem was originally published anonymously. The author, a Protestant scholar named John Kells Ingram, only put his own name to it in 1900, having feared previously for the safety of his children.

These lines really get to the heart of Clair Mitchell's book – the rewriting of history to airbrush the role of radical Protestants from the rebellion of 1798 and to obscure the unbroken thread of radicalism, dissent and rejection of unionism that persists within the Protestant community today.

In a state obsessed with tribal head counts based on one's perceived religion, it is always a source of frustration to be lumped into the Unionist category just because you

were born a Protestant. It suits the sectarian narrative that Protestant = Unionist, Catholic = Nationalist when the situation has always been more complex, more fluid.

The growing band who increasingly identify with neither camp is now estimated at 27 percent, according to the latest NI Life and Times Survey, but what of them? Where do they fit in the traditional headcount referenced above?

The Northern state seeks to exclude them, and it would be safe to assume that many, if not the majority, come from a Protestant background.

Rotten Prods, Lundy's, Dissenters, Radicals, and quite a few more colourful names have been used to describe Protestants who reject Unionism. I've certainly been called a few colourful names in my time, as has the author, and these terms are hardly meant as a compliment.

Personally, I prefer Dissenter but that's just me. I wear it as my badge of honour. Claire Mitchell uses the term "Alternative Protestants" which I hadn't heard until reading her fascinating book.

Precious little has been written about dissenting Protestants historically, but in the space of a year or so, two excellent books have come along; see also Susan McKay's – Northern Protestants – On Shifting Ground – Blackstaff Press 2021 (review IMR 31).

Rebellion and beyond

Mitchell's early chapters trace the story of the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and its aftermath, bringing the subsequent history of these events up to date in the same towns, fields, and graveyards of the present day.

In these chapters we hear of dates being changed on headstones after the rebellion so as not to link participants with 1798; we hear of families completely unaware of their relative's radical past and indeed whole towns and villages airbrushed out of history because of their involvement in rebellion.

Although the author states in the introduction that she doesn't want to over romanticise the period, the book does fall into over romanisation from time to time, which is probably inevitable given Mitchell's passion for the subject.

Presbyterianism was the dissenting religion during the eighteenth century and harsh laws ensured that Presbyterians were often discriminated against in the same manner as were Catholics. One result was that thirty or so Presbyterian Ministers played leading roles in the United Irish Rebellion of 1798, including its most famous leaders, Henry Joy McCracken, James "Jemmy" Hope and Wolfe Tone. Inspired by the ideals of liberty and freedom from the French and American Revolutions and particularly by Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*,

the United Irishmen sought to build a new state that would allow all to live with dignity regardless of their religion.

Lenin once noted how great revolutionaries get vilified in their lifetime only to be turned into harmless icons when they die (a process that he himself was subjected to by Stalin). This was done to James Connolly by his conservative successors, and it was also done to Henry Joy McCracken in Belfast. As it embraces modern forms of gentrification, Belfast is now full of symbolic reminders of the United Irishmen – where they lived and where they met. A new hotel or theme pub seems to pop up out of nowhere, with a statue to McCracken standing outside the pub only a hundred metres or so from where he was hung for treason. Going against this trend, Mitchell's book doesn't seek to cash in on the celebrity of dead revolutionaries. Instead, it brings their principles back to life, reminding people of the radical ideals for which they lived and died. It also paints a vivid picture of lesser-known heroes like Mary Ann McCracken campaigning in Belfast for suffrage and against slavery and offers a few wonderful lines on the houses in Belfast that lit a candle in the window around a little paper mobile to celebrate the storming of the Bastille in Paris. This is all well worth reading; however, it is the second half of the book I found the more interesting, particularly the closing chapters.

Protestant Dissent

The final section entitled – *Political Activism* - contains discussions with protestants who have become active in trade unions and socialist politics, feminism, green politics, and LGBTQ+ rights in recent years. A good example is Stephen – a socialist and trade unionist who grew up in Newtownards, a town always perceived as staunchly Unionist and the place where Ian Paisley and Peter Robinson drilled their paramilitary 3rd Force in 1985 in opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In Stephen's own words, 'What happens when you live here, is that Unionist history is just thrown across the place, like a great big soggy wet blanket, and everybody has to live beneath it, kind of crawling around, trying to make sense of who the hell they are. Suddenly you go, I can't sit here any longer pretending this is all right, it's not good enough any longer'.

But Newtownards has another history, a socialist history, that deserves to come to the fore. As far back as the 1790s, weavers began organising in the town for better wages; during the 1850s, tenants joined together to defend their rights and on Christmas Day in 1880, tenant farmers organised an enormous demonstration against the landlord class later represented by Carson and Craigavon.

The suffragettes were also prominent within the town while a full third of the population voted for the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) directly after partition. This is a history of worker's struggle that deserves to be recovered. And there's more. We are reminded that, as far back as 1842, a thousand people met at a place called Balds Yard to protest the Corn Laws and the Tory government. The speakers were anti sectarian, with Chartists, dissenting clergy, and the local Catholic priest all in attendance. Almost 150 years later, Stephen formed a trade union on almost the same spot. He had written to Tony Benn in the 1980's believing he was the only socialist in Newtownards, unaware of a hidden history that is brought to light vividly in this excellent book. Today the spirit of 1798 remains alive and well, growing in the tens of thousands who reject sectarianism and want to live in a better place. This book illustrates what it is to be a Northern Protestant Dissenter in the 21st Century. It is essential reading.

Book Review

Working Girl: On Selling Art and Selling Sex

Sophia Giovannitti

Verso

Sadhbh Mac Lochlainn

Working Girl is a series of personal essays which look at the art and sex industries, how they overlap and what they have in common from the perspective of Sophia Giovannitti who makes her living in both.

Giovannitti recounts her experiences in thoughtful and self-aware prose which draws the reader in. Her analysis of contemporary art (focused on themes of sex and sexuality) is interwoven with compelling recounts of her own experiences as a sex worker in New York and accompanied by her own, at times, contradictory musings on how it all ties together, what it means to her as both an artist and a sex worker, where one ends and the other begins.

I must admit I can be judgmental at times and initially, I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes as Giovannitti introduced her work. I was slightly suspicious of the author from the outset. A young woman with an extensive support network and other options decided to dip her toes into the sex industry to bypass her “near categorical hatred of work” and finance her artwork.¹ I was suspicious of her perspective as a person who may engage in sex work with a substantially lower risk than others. However, Giovannitti is quick to pull me out of my own biases and draw me into the work.

Throughout the essays, Giovannitti is clear that her experience of sex work is hers alone, she acknowledges the privileges that allow her to navigate the sex industry with more ease than others might, however, she also challenges the reader to view the sex worker not through the lens of victim or criminal, but as individuals with agency, a perspective that can sometimes get lost even among sex-positive feminists. Agency, consent, and coercion are themes that Giovannitti comes back to throughout the text. In her introduction, Giovannitti recalls her father's refusal to allow the commodification of his own artwork, instead choosing to keep it private and far from commerciality.

Offered opportunities at a young age to make money in the art world, my father instead turned to the honest work of construction, believing this would allow him to exist less subsumed by the monster of capitalism.²

However, Giovannitti shows the reader that by refusing to commodify his own art, her father was still unable to escape the pressures of capitalism. In reality, his artwork was shaped by his labour, the long hours of his job constraining his work as an artist, the tools he could afford, the energy to create, etc. Giovannitti tells us about other jobs she has worked, besides sex worker and

artist. The author makes it clear that she is not cut out, or does not want to be cut out, for the mundane rote of everyday menial jobs. You could, as she does, describe her political ideology as anti-work -

“I firmly believe that no one should have to work to live, that the imperative to sell one's labour in exchange for the fulfilment of basic survival needs is a foundational violation.”³

The coercive nature of capitalism means that none of us really have a choice, we work, or we go without. It is this coercive and un-consenting relationship between the individual and what they must do to ensure their own needs are met, that is constant within capitalism. Giovannitti comes back to this point again and again. In one example, the author talks about getting spat on and verbally abused in the context of her job as a waitress at a popular brunch restaurant compared to getting spat on and slapped as an agreed activity with a client in the context of sex work. “You can imagine in which case my hourly rate was higher; you can imagine in which case I felt more violated.”⁴ Through her writing, Giovannitti offers a nuanced and thought-provoking portrait of sex work, which focuses both on the vulnerability and the agency of those who work within the industry and allows us a better

understanding of the complex power dynamics at play. It is both deeply revealing and humanising while simultaneously holding a mirror up to the reader and asking us if we consent every day. Coercion exists everywhere but perhaps we fail to identify it in different areas of our own lives, projecting our coercion on to others instead.

Of course, the book does not just focus on sex work. Giovannitti is an artist, and her knowledge is vast and impressive. The book includes a range of art, poetry, personal essays, and other forms of expression which she references throughout and uses to build and contextualise her arguments. One of the most compelling themes is the author's study of the intersection between art and sex, artwork and sex work and the way women workers are viewed in both. Using examples like the artwork *Untitled* by Andrea Fraser, in which the artist films herself having sex with an unidentified art dealer who paid an undisclosed amount to participate in the work and have a copy of the video, Giovannitti forces the reader to ask where the line between artwork and sex work is drawn, prompting the reader to interrogate the power dynamics that exist in the art world and asks us what implications that has on the commodification of desire. Her own view is clear:

But in the end what makes Fraser's work art, and not a crime, is only that she calls it art, that she has a pre-existing, monied audience who will treat it as such, and that she has enough institutional clout to make her an unappealing legal target. I'm not criticizing, the same is true for me.⁵

She also highlights some of the basic financial dynamics of the relationship between art and sex arguing persuasively that "for all the hemming and hawing of what makes something art versus pornography, the answer is simple: the sale price. Art is just more expensive."⁶ Other works such as the 1991 artwork *Made in Heaven* by Koons highlight the difference between the male and the female experience, highlighting how female sexuality is so often weaponised against us.

Giovannitti addresses these themes in an incredibly humanising way and in so doing, captures the reader completely. Her debut is well worth a read, whether you agree with every analysis and conclusion that the author herself comes to, the journey she takes you on to get there is eye-opening and worth the time.

Endnotes

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² Ibid, p.7.

³ Ibid, p.58.

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Book Review

What is Antiracism and Why It Means Anticapitalism

Arun Kundnani

Verso

Eamon Rafter

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Acts of individual racist discrimination and abuse remain common but they are not the primary means through which racial domination is effected. Neoliberalism has given racial capitalism ways to organise itself without the need for explicit vocabulary or attitudes of white supremacy. Neoliberal racism operates through the hidden hand of property ownership and the iron fist of security agencies - Arun Kundnani ¹

On April 20, 1968, Enoch Powell spoke at a small meeting of Conservative Party activists in a Birmingham hotel, where he called for the remigration of a million or so Asian, African, and Caribbean people then living in the U.K. His often quoted ‘rivers of blood’ speech warned that ‘in fifteen or so years’ time, the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.’² The speech, which denounced the post-war consensus on race relations, led to demands for immediate expulsions and racist attacks in the streets. To limit any reputational damage, Powell was sacked from his position as Shadow Defence Secretary and would never again hold ministerial office.

But his views remained influential within the Conservative Party, with broad acceptance of his immigration control agenda culminating in Edward Heath's Immigration Act of 1971. This removed the right of those not born in the U.K., unless already legalised, to settle in the country. It also set the terms for British emigration policy into the future. Heath's act has never been repealed. Indeed, every leader of the major political parties has offered 'reassurance' to the public that they would continue to support strong controls on immigration ever since - implicitly meaning controls on non-white immigration. Liberals and conservatives often formally support antiracist initiatives, but they preside over societies that are themselves deeply racist. Exposing these contradictions is at the heart of Kundnani's important new book. He uses the above example to remind us that the official critique of racist incitement now championed by liberal governments, runs parallel to the development of neoliberalism with its poverty, its inequality, and its border security apparatus. While presenting a formal denunciation of racism, the political establishment continue to define Third World 'communal values' as an issue to be managed. Meanwhile, borders have increasingly become a 'new object of political contestation and an arena of racial meaning'. Brexit was a later articulation of this process, and through a historical reading, Kundnani sets out to

deconstruct the myth of liberal antiracism, arguing that genuine antiracism must be anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist, and anti-capitalist.

Myths of liberal antiracism

In his account of the development of liberal antiracism, Kundnani examines the ideas of theorists such as Magnus Hirschfield, Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas and Gunnar Myrdal, tracing the emergence of the concept of racism in the post Second World War arena. Hirschfield saw racism as a failure of public reason. Racist beliefs were seen as irrational, which in turn led governments to implement racist policies. A racist was defined as a bad person, while racism was viewed as a moral failure, a departure from the normal functioning of society and a descent into extremism. Reason and education are then offered as the correct response to build tolerance and remedy these moral failings. Kundnani points out that had Hirschfield explored how racism functioned structurally in Germany's African colonies, he might have come up with a different understanding of racism as an essential feature of colonising capitalism.

Gunnar Myrdal's 'An American Dilemma', published in 1944, is cited as a key text for how liberal antiracists

would attempt to solve the issue of racism in the U.S. He defined racism as essentially a matter of misguided beliefs and values in the minds of white Americans in contrast with the embrace of egalitarian values. Change could happen by moral conversion and self-healing that included the acceptance of equality for African Americans. This, in turn, would allow the U.S. to demonstrate the superiority of its values to the world.

Kundnani highlights the characteristics of this liberal antiracism as follows:

- A focus on individual racial attitudes, feelings, and beliefs to the exclusion of social and economic structures.
- A narrowing of the question of racism to the white, black relationship.
- A faith in education and other forms of public rationality as remedies for racism.
- A belief that economic hardship makes racist prejudice more likely.
- An assumption that moral progress is guaranteed by the excellence of US core values.

- A claim that US liberalism offers a universal ethos for the world.
- A separation of domestic antiracism from international struggles against racism, colonialism, and imperialism. And above all,
- A view of liberal government institutions and ruling elites as leading the way in antiracist progress.

Racism as a structure

While liberal antiracism was being outlined in the U.S. and Europe, a radically different version was being expressed in the places that Europe had colonised, and this is a primary focus for Kundnani. He describes European colonialism as ‘a vast system of legalised pillaging enshrined by racism and upheld by cannon and cavalry’. His discussion of the Marxist confrontation of colonialism covers a lot of ground with significant analysis of the writings of M.N. Roy, C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Joshua Nkrumah, Claudia Jones, Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, Stuart Hall, and A. Sivanandan. Though I cannot do justice to the detail here, it is important to reference the key themes that emerge, as racism gets collectively

defined as a key structure within imperialism and capitalism. C.L.R. James is a particularly important reference for Kundnani's analysis of racism as a structure, rather than as a set of beliefs and attitudes. James was born in Trinidad in 1901 and came to England in 1932, where he became a political activist and anti colonial organiser. Through this work, James came to see racism as a structure of generally observed social rules and policies that enabled social exploitation. This was not a denial that individual racist attitudes existed, but that they were fundamental. James argued that racial discrimination practised by the Nazis against the Jews was also practised by European colonial powers in Africa and elsewhere. Prejudice where it existed, he believed, was an effect of the structure rather than its cause.

In his 1938 book, 'The Black Jacobins', an examination of the Saint-Domingue revolution, James adapted Marx's base/superstructure analysis into a structural analysis of racism. The conclusion that Kundnani draws is that if racism is essentially structural and working at a deeper level than individual prejudice, then antiracism must involve radical collective action to transform societies rather than education to transform individual attitudes. As a Marxist, James focused on the relationship between

economic interests, cultural attitudes, and political organisation, but as Kundnani says, he also had to 'blacken' the orthodox European version of Marxism itself.

Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon were also Caribbean writers who took the relatively new concept of racism and refocused it on social structures rather than mental attitudes. These writers drew on the history of Caribbean slavery and its aftermath – and they were influential in the association of racism with structural analysis and the implications for Third World peoples. A real contribution of Kundnani's book is to restore the importance of these neglected writers to the Marxist tradition. The author highlights, for example, how Césaire, from Martinique, brought a new understanding to the structural relationships between colonialism, racism, and fascism in his 1950 book, 'Discourse on Colonialism', arguing that European fascism really began with European colonialism. When the colonisers claimed to be spreading modern liberal values to less developed people, underlying all this was a structural racism, which was denied by the apologists of contemporary liberal states.

Frantz Fanon, who had been a student of Césaire in turn took up the argument that

146 racism was not a psychological flaw, but that colonial countries were racist, even if only a minority of whites expressed racist beliefs. He believed that military and economic oppression legitimises racist beliefs by representing indigenous people as inferior. This, then, is an element of the larger systematic oppression which operates through a deeper structure of inequality that changes over time. In the case of Algeria, Fanon saw that the structure had been established in the nineteenth century when the European settlers took over the most productive land and expelled the native population. In his books 'The Wretched of the Earth' and 'Black Skin, White Masks', Fanon exposed the ways in which racist domination was able to hide itself in economic processes like land ownership and international trade rules. There is no longer a need to constantly assert the racial supremacy of white elites, when the rigour of the economic system continues the domination without the constant need to vocalise this domination. Most significantly, Kundnani demonstrates that because liberal antiracism has nothing to say about the economic inequalities between nations brought about by imperialism, it absolves the institutions most responsible for racist practices. The radical alternative to liberal antiracism, as he points out, emerges from James,

Césaire's, and Fanon's linking racism to the structures of colonialism through the idea of structural racism.

Racial capitalism

The concept of 'racial capitalism' is also central to Kundnani's argument, as he believes that structural racism is a product of the economics of exploitation rather than the psychology of animosity, and here, he references the ideas of Martin Luther King, Jamil Al Amin, and Claudia Jones. King had argued that racism in the U.S. was a structural form of oppression that was comparable to European colonialism elsewhere. Al Amin saw the black population of the U.S. as surplus to a capitalist and racist system, defined by Kundnani as, a 'carceral, economic, police and military system of violence.' Being surplus to the needs of capitalism also means being vulnerable to violence and deportation.

The concept of racial capitalism emerged most clearly from apartheid South Africa. Cedric Robinson in the U.S. in his 1983 book 'Black Marxism', argued that all capitalism was racial capitalism and that racism had always run deep in western culture. Kundnani quotes the antiracist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore to support this, saying, 'Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it', but

also that racism changes over time with changes in economies, social structures and the challenges that are made to these systems of oppression'. Kundnani then concludes that, if this is the case, antiracism must address itself to the time and the specific system in which it finds itself. Kundnani also applies these ideas to the British context through the writings of Stuart Hall, who argues that racist attitudes derive from capitalism's international division of labour, rather than causing it. Among others things, neoliberalism was, therefore, a reaction to radical anti colonialist and antiracist challenges, as capitalism sought to regenerate the older structures of racism in new forms.

These developments reached a peak with The War on Terror which was enacted from 2001 on what Kundnani calls 'surplus populations.' He describes a series of displacements in which Muslim 'extremists' stood in for the Palestinians, who stood in for surplus populations in general, as the 'savages at the frontiers of civilization'. An essentially racist project was initiated to secure the civilized world from the menace of savage violence. Israel's colonisation of Palestine is seen here as a microcosm of the broader U.S. led imperial structure which operates as a globalised racism. Another element of this is the militarised policing of the

urban dispossessed as racial capitalism characterises them the 'undeserving poor'. Especially in the U.S. drug enforcement and mass incarceration became the weapons of 'broken windows policing' as the failure of these surplus populations to adopt neoliberal norms were met with violent attempts to contain and control them.

Racism and neoliberal borders

The conclusion of Kundnani's analysis focuses on the boundaries between super exploited workers in the global South, unfree migrant workers, and 'freer' citizen workers as the essential racist borders of neoliberalism. Through neoliberal policy making, racial capitalism has found new ways to organise itself to uphold the pressures of the market. In the 21st century this is done through the intensified brutality of racially coded bordering, incarceration, policing and war, and state militarisation, as crossing borders without authorisation transgresses the racial ordering of the neoliberal system. Put slightly differently, as 'surplus populations' are of no value to neoliberal markets, they are subject to law and order, security borders and national security.

The more the contradictions of this system are caught up in the financial, ecological and health crises of our time, the more the state deploys racist violence and ideology to preserve control.

So Kundnani's great contribution is to show how liberal antiracism has failed, as it has been co-opted by the forces of neoliberalism and how the only way, we can move beyond this is to 're-energise the alternative traditions of radical antiracism' which he so eloquently outlines in this book. This means the struggle against capitalism must also be a struggle against racism. The reenergisation he speaks of is in the tradition of socialism, but its flag, he says, is a darker red. As he definitively puts it:

'To be antiracist means working collectively with organisations to dismantle racist border policing, carceral and military infrastructures. It also requires a commitment to the international redistribution of wealth'.

¹ All quotes in italics from Arun Kundnani. 2023. *What is Antiracism and Why It Means Anti capitalism*. London & New York, Verso.

² J. Enoch Powell. 1968. *The Papers of Enoch Powell*.



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