

CRITIQUE NOTES

The Critique Conferences have continued to be held in London in the first week of March. The last but one was on 'What is to be done'. The last one was on the "New Imperialism"? and the speakers included Istvan Meszaros, Mick Cox, Hillel Ticktin, Savas Matsas, Moshe Machover, Latief Parker, Yasmine Mather and Sami Ramidani. The themes involved the nature of the present world economy and the reasons for the war on Iraq, together with the consequences for the political economy of the international situation.

THE PRESENT EPOCH

The destruction of the World Trade Centre on September 11th has not led to the new stage in world politics some proclaimed but it has acted as trigger for events long in the making, from increased powers for the state, internal and external, to an intensification of the global capitalist crisis, both short-term and long-term.

No sane person can do anything but condemn the actions of an organisation best described as medieval mystical nationalists. Nor do we have to try to understand them, as it were. Their philosophy and their actions are reactionary. They do not stand for the working class or peasantry, still less for the poor and oppressed. They are a section of the 3rd World bourgeoisie/elite asking for a place in the sun from the dominant ruling class., using the despair of the masses, in a refracted form. The Taliban was largely their creature and stood condemned by their own acts inside Afghanistan.

It is another matter that we have to explain how such monstrous entities came into existence and how so many young idealistic and courageous young men joined them. The fact that the CIA and the United States in general was crucial in the war against the Soviet Union is not sufficient to explain why Bin Laden and his recruits mutated from CIA sponsored fighters to Muslim anti-American nationalists.

The essential nature of our present epoch is given by two phenomena: the decline of capitalism, something which is easy to understand in that part of the world, and the heavy defeat sustained by the working class with the rise of Stalinism.

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Under conditions of absolute poverty, where Stalinism is seen as a national oppressor, an alternative movement against capitalism is required. We have to remember that many Tajiks, Kazaks, Uzbeks etc fled to Afghanistan over the years from Soviet Central Asia, most particularly in the period of collectivisation when many millions perished in the Stalinist famine of 1933. Since Stalinism commanded very little support in the USSR in any case, its citizens, in Central Asia, would communicate their critique to their relations in Afghanistan. The Stalinist Najibullah regime, itself, could never have been better than the regimes overthrown in the USSR and Eastern Europe, though the atavistic Taliban regime has inevitably given it some legitimacy. In any case, Stalinist parties in the Arab world had already discredited themselves, long before the USSR came to an end.

THE END OF STALINISM AND THE REVIVAL OF MARXISM

The end of Stalinism had two paradoxical effects.

On the one hand, its disappearance meant that the controls which Stalinism exercised on the left began to disappear. In days gone by the Stalinists were not averse to eliminating or at least beating up opponents competing for the same constituency. The far left was inevitably contained and even destroyed. Anarchist and other spontaneist type movements, left or right wing, were similarly dealt with. In other words, there could have been no place for Al-Qaeda. Either the young idealists would have joined the Stalinists or they would have been marginalized both physically and ideologically, whatever their viewpoints.

On the other hand, it opened up a vacuum on the left. For all its brutality, total distortion of Marxism, and worship of hierarchy, it attracted oppositionists to capitalism. Its removal opened the way, in principle, to the formation of genuine Marxist or socialist parties, particularly in a period when social democracy had virtually vanished.

While left sectarianism is diminishing and Marxism is less tarred with Stalinism, the rise of the far left has been slow even if clear. Under these conditions, the vacuum is being filled by all kinds of creatures from Anarchists to Al-Qaeda.

Much of their attraction lies in that their solution is both immediate and legitimate. Religion is highly respectable in modern capitalism and fundamentalism is widely accepted as a natural evolution from the teachings of the founders. At the same time, the solution is found in the next world, so not disturbing this one too much. It is no accident that the CIA found fundamentalism a useful instrument against both the left and Stalinism.

On the other hand, Marxists have to put across a complex message: that capital is the source of exploitation and oppression but that Stalinism was also exploitative and oppressive and that modern capitalism is a compound of its original form, its declining form and aspects of transition. In other words, it is one thing to appeal to the poor and oppressed, as before 1914, on the basis of an alternative society-socialism- and another to make the same appeal today. Even if people accept the desirability of socialism, they are inclined to see it as a utopia. The fact that the religious utopia of heaven is pure superstition will eventually show itself but not in conditions of grinding misery where religion remains, in Marx's words: "the heart of a heartless world". Inevitably, in the long run, religious regimes expose themselves, as in Iran, and their failure must add to the pressure for an authentic socialist movement.

BARBARISM

We live in a night which awaits its dawn. In the meantime barbarism shows itself in ever new forms. In the last thirty years we have witnessed the ethnic killing of up to half a million in Ruanda, and thousands in the territories of former Yugoslavia, religious wars leading to up to quarter of a million dead in Tajikistan, political suppression of the left which led to thousands killed in Chile, and even more thousands in Argentina, not to speak of the millions who died in Cambodia and Vietnam in the US crusade against communism. Africa lies devastated by wars over much of its territory, wars which are largely a legacy of colonialism and the intervention of the great powers. The numbers are only increased by the devastating war being conducted by Russia against the Chechens. Nor can we forget the million and more who died in Afghanistan in the war between the CIA and the USSR, and now several thousand innocent civilians killed in the US war against the Taliban. This, of course, leaves out the many millions of those suffering from Aids and other diseases like TB and malaria, who are today condemned to death because companies and governments will not provide them with the

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necessary medicines. The World Trade Centre atrocity and the drive to war against Iraq have to be put in this perspective.

Socialist movements will inevitably arise and they are growing today. Many point to the defects of existing organisations and it is not hard to find fault.

THE FAILURE OF THE LEFT

Much of the activity of the US left seems to be around solidarity with Third World nationalist organisations, which have nothing to do with the left, and which often victimise and kill their own left, as soon as they take power. They supported the Angolan MPLA even though it had gaoled its own left within 3 months of taking power. They continue to support the South African ANC even though it is the IMF's star pupil, with numbers employed well down and profits up, not to speak of the largest percentage of Aids sufferers in the world. This same ANC government resolutely refuses to supply any medicines to help the Aids victims. Such US movements are better described as being nationalist American anti-nationalists. They oppose American imperialism but by solidarising with local nationalists. The result is not just that they become third world nationalists but they become, in a peculiar way, American nationalists too, because they see the world as ruined by bad American nationalism, which they want to correct with a good American nationalism. Much of the US left has also descended into the depths of identity politics rather than class issues. Of course, much of this can be explained by the limitations consequent on a divided imperial working class. But that is not the only reason. Unfortunately the US left has suffered and continues to suffer from a Stalinist heritage which made it easy prey to the US ruling class.

The left in other countries suffer from similar problems though not to the same degree. The rise and rise of anti-American nationalism in the last period has not been sufficiently condemned by the left. It is all too easy to join with elements of the middle and ruling classes in ridiculing and attacking Americans, rather than the US ruling class.

Unfortunately, the authentic left, in particular, has suffered from its marginalisation to such a degree that it too easily proclaims a victory where there is none.

The operations against the various conferences of the G8, IMF and now war with Iraq represent an awakening of youth in a world without theory or understanding. Anti-capitalism is anti-corporatism or anti-authority but it is not a move to replace capitalism with socialism. It is the spontaneous awakening of a new generation, which finds a world in which the rich become richer by making the poor poorer, where drug companies charge the destitute huge sums to retain their health, where financial companies proclaim ever higher profits while millions are in ever deeper debt, where the future of youth in the developed countries is ever more insecure and ever more tied to the evaluation of their superiors. There is only one solution: the assumption of power by the class which is in capitalism but not of capitalism, but that class is not yet ready for the battles to come. So the youth, the students and all those who are not bound, or not yet bound, within the system of wage-labour respond to the future battle cries in their own inchoate way.

As is well known, left organisations can be so undemocratic in their structure or in their operation or both that they present a very unattractive face to possible recruits. Bourgeois political parties are themselves even more undemocratic, with policy and appointments made from the top down, but the propaganda machine pretends otherwise. True grassroots governance is impossible under capitalism and the penetration by the secret police of left organisations combined with a long history of necessary protection against the brutality of Stalinists and Fascists makes for organisations with permanent or semi-permanent leaderships.

THE NEW LONG-TERM WAR AND LEFT RESPONSE

How are we to react to the war launched by Bush and Blair? Much of the European left has already responded by opposing the war on pacifist grounds. They object to the killing of innocent Afghan civilians. Indeed they could object to the killing even of Afghans in military uniform, after all they are conscripts and even if they volunteered, they almost certainly did not know what they were doing. They object to the war against Iraq on similar grounds.

And yet the Marxists are not pacifists. They are against needless sacrifices and unnecessary wars and stand for the abolition of all wars but they are not pacifists. The justification provided: that Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda must be destroyed before it commits more atrocities would be entirely acceptable if

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the American government were a socialist government bent on educating people out of medievalism.

Some people answer that there ought to be a police operation not war. That would make sense on two conditions. The first is that it could *realistically* be done with a police operation and not a war. The second, is that it be done by an authority acceptable to the majority of the population of much of the world. That authority cannot be the American ruling class or the United Nations which is the more acceptable face of the same class.

There are really two questions. One is how to stop the actions of an organisation which is insane, when looked at in any historical perspective. The other is one of vengeance. There is no point in revenge but every point in putting this organisation out of business. Even from a ruling class point of view, it is clear that the killing of Bin Laden will only turn him into a martyr to be worshipped by thousands and possibly by millions of followers. Their worship would not be rational, so there is no way of avoiding that effect.

In reality, the war against 'terrorism' almost certainly cannot root out an international organisation owing its strength to the weakness of world capitalism and the absence of an alternative to the self-evident oppression and exploitation of the times. Even if the war does lead to the total eradication of the organisation and its leaders, there is no reason to rule out an even more murderous successor. Only real hope provided by a real organisation rooted in the real world can do that.

So what line can we take? We oppose the war because it is a war conducted by our ruling class in its own interest, not in the interests of those who died or might die in future. We oppose the war because it necessarily cannot achieve its stated objective but it will kill, maim and injure thousands of innocent people. We oppose the war because it is strengthening the ruling class against its own working class and so we call on the working class, ie everyone, to oppose the measures which remove hard won political and economic rights. We call on the working class to go further and put forward its own demands at this time in direct opposition to the attempt to cynically use the occasion to raise profits and weaken the position of the working class.

THE MEANING OF THE NEW MEASURES

Above all, the ruling class has taken the opportunity to increase the burden on the working class both white collar and blue collar.

By passing a series of repressive laws and decrees, it has put the whole working class movement under surveillance. Only the naïve can believe that the increased phone tapping and covert email reading is confined to those who support Bin Laden. You do not need new measures to find Al-Qaida. They are not either so numerous or so difficult to detect that the secret services, who, in any case, tap phones as required, needed more legislation. The atmosphere of fear which has been fostered by governments and the media makes any kind of opposition more difficult.

Above all it is clear that this attempt at the re-introduction of permanent war has little to do with 'terrorism' or 'terrorist states' like Iraq. It was obvious that the US would wipe out the Taliban in short order and it is equally obvious that it can overthrow any oppressive regime in a small and backward country like Iraq. However, there is a difference between overthrowing an isolated, medieval, unpopular regime linked to external violence and a horrendous political administration in tune with Arab nationalism. The political consequences are unpredictable both in the future of the country and in the raised instability of other Arab countries.

There has been much talk of oil. While the United States cares little about the actions of odd African states, like Zimbabwe, it is very concerned about the various countries of the Middle East precisely because of the oil. But this is more of a background than an immediate cause. Western oil companies have oil distribution locked up. Technically Saudi Arabian oil is nationalised and the United States will gain little by taking over the oilfields of Iraq. There is more than enough oil supply today from various sources around the globe, and the gigantic oil companies like Exxon, BP, Shell and lesser though still huge US companies control the market. The oil companies of other countries like France, Italy etc are subordinate. Even a scenario in which all the oil of Iraq is handed over to US companies is hardly worth the risk of much of the oil in the Middle East going up in flames so reducing profits for months and possibly longer.

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The issue is not about oil. Nor is it about democracy, since Western governments have historically supported some of the most authoritarian and undemocratic governments in the world, from Chile's Pinochet, the Argentinian generals, to the various undemocratic Greek governments after the war and of course its contemporary ally, the military regime of Musharaff in Pakistan. They even supported Saddam Hussein in the eighties. It is, in any case, obvious that a country in which many potential voters remain unregistered, where the majority do not vote, and where decisions depend on the quantity of money spent on the election is not itself democratic. In other words, the motive for the invasion of Iraq lies elsewhere.

It is hard to deny that the Iraqi population will probably be better off if the United States imposes a semi-liberal regime. This has been a point made by people such as Chris Hitchens. They may even be much better off depending on how events go but that does not give the United States government the right to invade to impose its own solution, a solution which might involve the death and injury of thousands or even tens of thousands of ordinary people. In any case, US negotiations with opposition Iraqis leaves very little reason to be optimistic that Saddam Hussein will be replaced by anything other than a market authoritarian regime.

It is our view that the nature of the US and world economy is such that it needs an external threat in order to contain the working class and justify management of the economy through military expenditure. The Cold War established an equilibrium which was progressively disrupted with the decline of Stalinism. The present world crisis is entirely different from previous post-war downturns. It is the first time that there is a surplus of world capital. Orthodox economic journalists talk of an overinvestment downturn. The Cold War economy allowed for military expenditure close to 3 times what it was by 2000. But it is not just a technical question. The Cold War economy controlled the unions, the militants, and those who simply wanted a higher standard of living. It is clear that there is now a general shift away from the bizarre working class forms which flourished in those times, even in the United States. Saddam Hussein simply happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

TERRORISM-THE ENEMY OF THE WORKING CLASS.

Marxists, as opposed to Anarchists and Stalinists, have always opposed terrorism. They know the history of the working class movement; a history in which terrorism always provides an excuse to the ruling class to introduce 'state terrorism', a period in which civil rights are suspended and torture is often used. It always leads to a massive defeat. They oppose terrorism on the principled ground that the success of the working class movement can only come through the action of the workers as a class and never through the actions of a few deluded individuals. Even in those instances where the emerging left killed an autocrat, like Alexander 2nd or the Tsarist first ministers-Plehve and Stolypin, and many in the population rejoiced, Marxists could not support the policy.

"The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past." (Karl Marx-18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon)

There is no substitute for the emergence of working people as a class. There is no short cut. Equally, that emergence has to find its expression through a party or parties and the kind of libertarianism which has taken hold in a period of despair has no place. In the end, an anarchist is a consistent liberal, who is lost because he has no way forward, so that individual or isolated group action appears the only solution.

Marx's famous paragraph in the 18th Brumaire, also quoted by Trotsky in his *1905*, is worth repeating bearing in mind the massive defeat suffered by the working class in the twenties and thirties, which has led to the complexity of the present.

...proletarian revolutions like those of the nineteenth century constantly criticize themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew; they deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their opponents only so the latter may draw new strength from the earth and rise before them again *more gigantic than ever*, recoil constantly from the indefinite colossalness of their own goals -- until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves call out: Hic Rhodus, hic salta!.