

CRITIQUE NOTES

The next *Critique* conference in London will be on Saturday, March 5th 2005 at the London School of Economics, London. The proposed subject is *The Future of the Left*. The last conference was held around the theme of *Why Nationalism Cannot Succeed*. Speakers included Bertell Ollman, Istvan Meszaros, Hillel Ticktin, Jack Conrad, Michael Cox, Savas Matsas and Yasmine Mather and the theoretical discussion was at a high level.

THE WAR ON IRAQ

The year 2003 has seen the Iraq war and its denouement. The arrest of Iraqi trade-union leaders in December 2003 clearly illustrated the nature of the occupation regime. The United States can only fail in its objectives to set up a successful 'democratic' government. The reasons for its current and future failure are in themselves instructive.

In the first place, contemporary US and British governments can see the economy only through the eyes of finance capital. As a result, they assume that private enterprise is the alpha and omega of all economies. Since this is a reactionary utopia, any attempt to impose such a form on Iraq can only miscarry. As defenders of the US policy cite the case of Marshall Aid, it is important to note how Europe got back on its feet. In the first place, the governments embarked on a state housing policy, rationing, and a controlled policy of nationalisation. In other words, the state played a crucial role in organising the economy, under the banner of planning. In the second place, currencies were allowed to devalue, particularly against the US dollar, and a measure of direct protectionism was allowed to continue.

In contrast, the US has simply left things to develop while repairing certain aspects of the war-damaged infrastructure. With most of the population dependent on handouts, that is a recipe for disaster. The intended privatisations are unlikely to achieve much more than raising the rate of unemployment even further.

The population is no better off than before, and many are even worse off. Inevitably, discontent can only rise, playing into the hands of Baathists, religious fanatics, nationalists, and other right-wing opponents of the US regime. In the long run, the working class and the left will show itself. In the meantime, the remnants of the Iraqi Communist Party, which is represented in the US-appointed Governing Council, will perform the kind of job that modern Stalinists seem to perform, trying to argue for limited concessions to labour while maintaining the overall system and thereby containing labour.

The military success in the war in Iraq was widely expected and indeed inevitable, while the succeeding guerrilla war was equally anticipated and also inevitable, even if the occupying powers were surprised. There has been no revolt in Middle Eastern countries as a result, which was no surprise, given the absence of any secular nationalist force and--more importantly--any left. However, the situation is even more unstable than it was before the invasion. At the same time, the actions of the US government have broken the political alliance of the capitalist powers. This is not the same thing as the common action of the ruling classes of different countries, as it is clear that the ruling class was divided over the issue and that central sections almost certainly opposed the war, although they went along with it.

CAPITALIST MUDDLE AND LEFT HOPES

This all makes for a great capitalist muddle, over which the left can only wonder. The great demonstrations against the war, particularly in the UK, Spain and Italy, where the governments supported the United States, have marked a new stage in the revival of the left. There are no successor movements, but these are still early days. The fact that there could be such unprecedented demonstrations pointed to the limitations of parliamentary democracy, and the newspapers were not backward in saying so. We may talk of its decline. Those taking part had a wider agenda than just the war on Iraq. They were critical of the failures of their own governments, both politically and economically, and the need to protest against the Iraq War allowed them to show their discontent.

That such a wide section of the population could take part in a demonstration essentially led by the organised left showed a major change in the distribution of

power in the country. The left remains small, fragmented, and confused, but governments can no longer rely on the hatchet men of social democracy and the axe-men of Stalinism to undermine popular protest--and there is much to protest about.

In spite of the current 'upturn' in the United States, most workers in most countries face an uncertain future, with real--as opposed to official--levels of unemployment remaining high and even increasing, and real wages static or declining. At the same time, as in the Great Depression, orthodox economists are baying for the blood of pensioners, welfare recipients, the sick, and the unemployed. They want them to get even fewer resources than they are getting now. As is to be expected, the Social Democrats in Germany have conceded to these demands, and the same process is underway in other countries.

With the end of the Cold War, it appears that the capitalist class or its representatives have decided that they have nothing to fear and so they can undo some of the concessions made to labour. The so-called middle class is being proletarianised and impoverished, while the various forms of protection for workers are being dismantled in the interests of labour flexibility. Those areas of the economy where the market had been limited are under pressure to marketise, even where such marketisation can only produce an unholy muddle, as in education and health. The inefficiency of private enterprise has taken time to show itself, given that nationalisation under capitalism is itself inefficient, but its patent failure, as in the railways, has fed into a changing mood.

The so-called economic stabilizers are in reality political stabilizers, and they are being dismantled. We can only wonder whether 'they' know what they are doing. The working class in the West was politically contained, as we have said above, by social democracy and Stalinism, but it was also divided and transformed by the very economic measures that are now being removed or diminished.

So the great demonstrations that struck the West in February 2003 expressed the discontent of a population, opening its eyes to a world which has to be changed in order to be human. It is true, of course, that the follow up demonstrations have been a fraction of their original number, even if they have been of a

respectable size, and it is also true that the leadership of the demonstrations leaves much to be desired. But the point is not that there will be a revolution tomorrow--because that is clearly not on the cards--but that the slow recovery of left politics after the great slumber of the Stalinist years is under way.

STALINISM AND ITS APPALLING LEGACY

This journal has been accused of being miserabilist in the past because its contributors have argued that Stalinism would prevent the occurrence of any real change, whether in the East or West. In the East, the complex system of Stalinist coercion prevented any left emerging. In the West, the Stalinist parties used what force they could against the left, but the extreme repression used by the Soviet Union's ruling group to maintain the exploitation of the workers repelled the majority of the population and made Marxism appear deeply unattractive. As a result, the editors had little hope of socialist change.

Logically, the end of Stalinism has changed the political situation, and this journal may be regarded as both apocalyptic and overly optimistic. The contributors to *Critique* have tended to reject talk of a crisis of Marxism. After all, if one takes the view that there was very little Marxism in the last seventy years or so when Stalinism was rampant, there can be no crisis today. If the left was small in number, scattered and theoretically underdeveloped in that period, it is likely to grow in the post-Stalinist era.

Although it is taking time for that left to emerge, it is doing so. Whether it is the considerable electoral advances of that left in France, or the growth of inchoate movements like the European Social Forum, anti-globalisation protests and anti-war demonstrations, it is clear that capitalism is coming under a confused and often obfuscating but nonetheless definite attack. Since the movements have young, old, male, female, black, and white members, they encompass the society as a whole, but they are not the vanguard of the working class, even if many of their participants come from the working class.

History seems to repeat itself time and again in order to make a forward movement. The new generation has to learn the old lessons, the old philosophy, and the old political economy before another advance can be made. Some argue

that we need new categories, new slogans, and even a new philosophy. Their 'new' philosophy inevitably turns out to be ancient nostrums phrased in new words. New Labour and its Third Way was a clear shift to conservatism with a wholesale shift to the market. Those further left 'discover' that the market can never be overcome and find ways of making wage labour permanent. In despair, some turn to promoting immediate reforms. Others prefer the lesser evil and end up voting for the party that appears less crass and less brutal. They justify their actions by pointing to the less savoury aspects of some of the contemporary left-its sectarianism, ignorance, populism, and so forth.

No one who is genuinely on the left can be surprised by the fact that Lula, in Brazil, is the darling of the right or that the African National Congress (ANC), in South Africa, is the star pupil of the IMF. There is no reason to speak of betrayal as these movements were not of the left, even if some individuals and even some groups thought otherwise. The fact that they assumed political power at one and the same time showed both the strength of the ruling class in absorbing elements of their opposition and their weakness, in that they had to do so.

Those on the genuine left, who stand with and by the working class, have to accept that history can move slowly before it rushes forward. The disappointments, sacrifices and embarrassments that the authentic left has to put up with at the moment are a small price to pay for the certainty that the left is on the move.

There is a long way to go to establish working-class parties, but the way is becoming clearer.