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“England and America owe their liberty to commerce, which created a new species of power to undermine the feudal system. But let them beware of the consequences: the tyranny of wealth is still more galling and debasing than that of rank.”—
Mary Wollstonecraft,
Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (1802).

Brexit and national unity

The British-imposed border in Ireland was used as a pawn in negotiations with the EU to secure its interests, the needs of the Irish people being well down the list of priorities writes **Eugene McCartan** Page 2



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Socialist Voice

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Brexit and national unity

EUGENE MCCARTAN

AFTER NEARLY half a century of membership of the EEC and then the EU, Britain finally left on 1 January 2021. The period leading up to its departure was heavily choreographed, with displays of brinkmanship, the stock in trade of the European imperial powers of Britain, France and Germany and the other old imperial states of Europe that make up the core of the EU.

The fact that the particular characteristics of Brexit arose out of an inter-imperialist conflict and were determined by the most right-wing forces in Britain may have significantly influenced the vote, while the Left Brexit campaign, which expressed correct arguments, was sidelined during and after the referendum.

From the beginning of the leave negotiations the British state was confronted by a number of contending interests. A popular majority voted to leave, in the main for reasons to do with sovereignty, while significant sections of big business wanted to retain as much access as possible to the EU single market. In the end Britain got its “special relationship”



with the EU that it had identified a number of years ago, and the “Northern Ireland Protocol.”

At present it appears to have abandoned unionism as its strategic partner in the north of Ireland, relegating it as a minor player. But we know from bitter experience that Britain never concedes ground, just

changes the terrain of struggle on which progressive forces in Ireland have to challenge them, their old allies now sitting at a side table while old “enemies” are brought to the table to have a look at the menu and see what delights and promises are on offer if they comply with the needs of imperialism.

The British-imposed border in Ireland was used as a pawn in negotiations with the EU to secure its interests, the needs of the Irish people being well down the list of priorities. Those negotiations confirm the life experience of many colonised and dominated peoples and nations: that imperialism has only interests to pursue, and only temporary friends.

Some on the left in Ireland appear to separate anti-imperialism from class, or *vice versa*. But history has shown that nothing in a class-divided society is above class and, as Marx pointed out, that all previous history is a history of class struggle.

If we apply this materialist view of history, the relationship of the Six Counties with the various imperialist blocs is a class question; but that doesn't mean either that it should be reduced to an economic “gas and

Partition: 100 years of landlordism

JIMMY DORAN

HOUSING POLICY in both jurisdictions in Ireland has failed the citizens abysmally. One of the sources of communal revolt in the North was the unfair distribution of housing. As only ratepayers and their spouses had a vote in local elections, priority in housing was given to the unionist community, to allow them to control the councils.

Since the cessation of the armed conflict twenty years ago we may have peace, but there is no end to the violent effects of the capitalist system every day on our people. The housing waiting-list is longer now than it was back in 1968. With the ending of the

Orange state, the two communities are now suffering the crisis in housing together.

As the dust settles, the time is fast approaching when citizens will realise that the enemy is not the religion of their neighbour but one common enemy: imperialism.

Under the Thatcher regime, much of the public housing stock was sold off to tenants. In 1991 there were 170,000 houses in public ownership; by 2016 this had been cut almost in half, to 90,000. Investment in new public housing is 400 per cent less than payments of public money in subsidies to private landlords. Payments totalling more than £400 million were made by the Housing Executive to private

landlords in rent subsidies from the beginning of 2017 to the end of 2018; only £109 million during the same period was invested in new public housing.

The commodification and the transfer of housing provision from the state to the landlord class is unceasing.

With 70 per cent of households on the waiting-list now categorised as “in priority need” of public housing, this is the highest on record. There are 40,000 on the housing waiting-list, 10 per cent of whom are waiting more than five years. Though the average time spent on the waiting-list is between one and two years, some are on the waiting-list for decades.

The British-imposed border in Ireland was used as a pawn in negotiations with the EU to secure its interests, the needs of the Irish people being well down the list of priorities.

water” question. That would be a crass and crude reductionist approach to understanding social processes and social forces.

The “Northern Ireland Protocol” agreed between the EU and the British state hasj4

now placed the economic border between the two down the middle of the Irish Sea while the political border remains as before. The Six Counties will constitutionally remain within the British state while staying within the EU single market, though Britain is outside it.

This development is a definite weakening of the east–west economic power relations, a weakening of the economic ties between the Six Counties and the British state that has only the potential to grow over time, and the potential to open up the ground for greater all-Ireland economic and social policies, even within conditions of EU control, with at the same time the prospect of Scottish “independence” within an EU context significantly weakening, if not breaking, the United Kingdom.

The people of the Six Counties have little influence or control over economic and social policies, which are determined by the needs and interests of London. The Executive has no fiscal powers or control: all it can do is divvy up the block grant on a sectarian basis, further fostering the division historically

In the South it is no better. According to the 2016 census, private rented accommodation is now the main form of tenure in cities and towns, while overcrowding has increased for the first time in more than fifty years. As in the North, this is a result of government policy of transferring the provision of homes to the private sector, selling off public housing to tenants, and ceasing, or reducing to a trickle, the building of public housing.

The Society of Chartered Surveyors in Ireland found in a recent survey that the cheapest two-bedroom apartment in Dublin costs €375,000. To qualify for a mortgage would require a deposit of €37,500 and an income of €96,000 a year. The applicants would also need to have no children. This excludes all couples on or below the average joint income of €88,000.

The average rent for this property is

established by the British.

A number of questions need to be explored. Has Brexit created greater contradictions for the oldest and most entrenched imperialist power in Ireland, namely Britain? We need to evaluate the situation as regards the shifting balance of forces in Ireland.

- Is the weakening of the most entrenched imperialist force a progressive step?
- Is the strengthening of co-operation on an all-Ireland basis a progressive step forward, even within the straitjacket of the EU?
- Does the evolving situation and the weakening of unionism create better conditions for uniting the working class on an all-Ireland basis, on common goals and strategies?

At the present time there is no “silver bullet” for knocking out simultaneously the triple lock of imperialism (Britain, the EU, and the United States). Given the existing balance of forces, if inter-imperialist complication creates better conditions for advancing the interests of the working class, then that is where the left and anti-imperialist forces need to focus: building resistance and promoting qualitative changes that affect the balance of power of class forces in Ireland in a long-term way.

This means the further weakening of east–west (Six Counties and Britain)

€2,000 a month, which would equate with a mortgage on a property worth €500,000—a nice little earner for the landlord class. Even if the landlord had to borrow to buy the property (though 53 per cent of all homes bought in 2018 were paid for in cash) they would be making a steady profit from the rent, as the tenant pays the full cost of mortgage.

Just as in the North, huge sums are paid to private landlords in rent subsidies: €1 billion is paid to landlords every year.

There were 68,693 people on the housing waiting-list in June 2019. There are 10,000 people categorised as homeless in the South. The homeless figures in the North are twice this, though they are calculated in a different manner.

As far as housing is concerned, there is nothing to celebrate in the

economic and political relations and strengthening north–south relations with united demands and the struggle of working people on an all-Ireland basis.

The decision by Britain to break with the EU creates contradictions that radical and republican forces should exploit to the fullest. The EU is caught up in many contradictions and internal tensions. There are progressive forces in every country that fundamentally oppose the EU and what it stands for, and they share common goals and can be united against the EU itself.

Only the Irish people have an interest in ending partition and British rule in Ireland, but we may secure solidarity in that struggle from others in Europe and beyond.

One of the great weaknesses of Sinn Féin is its myopic position on the EU and the abandoning of its anti-imperialism, falling into the trap that nothing can be achieved outside the EU and the existing social and economic structures, while others supposedly on the left erect an invisible wall between the struggle for national unity and fulfilling working-class aspirations and the fight for socialism, using phoney language of “working-class interests” to mask their underlying pro-union, pro-imperialist ideology, allowing a veto on progress to reactionary elements within the working class. ★

hundredth anniversary of the partition of this country by Britain. Partition has not served the people’s housing needs; instead it has filled the pockets of the landlord class.

As the demand for the reunification of Ireland becomes louder, the working class must not be ignored this time. We must learn from our history and not repeat the mistakes of the past. This time we will not only have a democratic programme for our people, we will make sure it is implemented. As stated in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916, “We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible.”

Ireland will only be truly free when we are independent and sovereign and the people own everything, from the plough to the stars. ★

What type of united Ireland do we want?



TOMMY McKEARNEY

IT'S EASY TO misinterpret what's published in newspapers, and particularly so when the narrative appears favourable to a reader's own point of view. However, when three pillars of the British establishment's conservative press publish articles raising doubts about Northern Ireland's future within the United Kingdom, and all published within the space of one week, it is at least worth reflecting on the significance of this phenomenon.

Speculating on whether or not this is part of a conspiracy is to miss the point. The fact that the *Evening Standard*, *Financial Times* and *Sunday Times* are covering the issue in this fashion is a clear indication of informed thinking within Britain's ruling class.

The series of articles began with a comment piece from the editor of the *Evening Standard* the former Tory party chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne. And, notwithstanding the bitter Ulster unionist description of him as yesterday's man, Osborne not only reflects the received wisdom of high-

level opinion-formers in London but also commands the attention of many influential Conservative Party movers and shakers.

His assessment of the Six Counties' position within the United Kingdom is blunt and startling. "Northern Ireland is already heading for the exit door," he writes. It pains him to report that "most here [*i.e.* in Britain] and abroad will not care."

The full article is well worth reading, albeit deeply alarming for Northern unionists, with Osborne arguing that Scotland is vital to the sustainability of the United Kingdom while Northern Ireland is not.¹

As if that dose of reality therapy were not enough, the *Financial Times* journalist Robert Shrimmsley wrote an article published under the heading "Democratic Unionists are now Irish reunification's secret weapon."² As the title indicates, he filleted the DUP's incompetent performances. In his biting assessment he wrote that the strategic judgements of the North's largest party "have been among the most consistently witless in recent politics."

He illustrated his claim by stating that the ultra-unionist DUP scuttled Theresa May's withdrawal plan, which, as he sees it, "maintained the integrity of the union . . . only to see Boris Johnson sign up to a regulatory border in the Irish Sea." He then pointed to the impact of the current Brexit deal, which keeps the North inside the EU customs union and single market for goods, weakening its legal and commercial ties to the United Kingdom—an opinion echoing

Read that again



DECLAN McKENNA

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN'S choice of Samantha Power *left* as head of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) got the Irish media into a flurry of excitement.

The *Irish Times* reported that Power was born in Dublin and had "worked as an activist, journalist and author before joining the Obama administration,"

where she was the US ambassador to the United Nations. From there on the *Times* dutifully quoted the propaganda provided to it, beginning with its headline, "Samantha Power chosen by Biden to lead top US development agency."

But the *Irish Times* was not alone in describing USAID as a humanitarian development agency, now to be guided by the human-rights defender Samantha Power. The *Irish Examiner* has her as "international development aid boss" and head of the "agency that oversees US foreign humanitarian and

‘Britain’s long retreat from empire has left it with much experience in determining the transition from direct rule to neo-colonial status. After all, the Irish Free State was one of its early successes in this field.’

Osborne’s description of the Northern Ireland protocol as delivering, de facto, an economic united Ireland.

Newsagents had hardly removed copies of the above-mentioned papers from their shelves when the *Sunday Times* joined the discussion. Although not actually predicting the demise of the Union, it published the results of an opinion poll showing that a majority of people in the Six Counties would support holding a border poll within the next five years.

While such a poll at this point would most probably return a slim pro-Union majority, the very fact that it would take place underlines the precarious nature of Northern Ireland’s constitutional position. Moreover, in spite of the newspaper’s assertion that an end to partition is not within sight, the findings of the opinion poll were not nearly so conclusive in that respect.

Reaction to all this was predictable. Michelle O’Neill of Sinn Féin welcomed the findings and called on the Dublin government to prepare for unity. Not surprisingly, Arlene Foster disagreed, declaring demands for a referendum to be reckless and divisive. Interestingly, though, less than twelve months ago Foster was predicting that there wouldn’t be a border poll in her lifetime. Perhaps the chastening experience of dealing with duplicitous senior Tories brought about a change of mind.

Regardless of opinions held around the Stormont Executive table, it is becoming increasingly obvious that there is a serious debate within British governing circles about the future of the entire Union, a discourse that must surely include the Six Counties.

Moreover, during any such dialogue some participant is bound to mention the difficulties created for the Tory party during Brexit negotiations by the dreary old “Irish (Northern nowadays) question.”

All told, it’s clear that partition is no longer only an academic subject but is instead a live political issue. To repeat the words of one of Ireland’s leading communists of the last century, we may ignore the national question but the national question won’t ignore us.

Whether the ruling class here and in Britain are familiar with the thinking of the late Seán Murray is doubtful, but we can be sure that on this one point they at least share his analysis. Mícheál Martin may fluster and prevaricate while the DUP growl and fulminate about reunification, but there’s little doubt that the permanent government or the deep state is making pragmatic calculations. They are aware that constitutional change is inevitable, and are determined to shape the resulting governing institutions and economic system.

Britain’s long retreat from empire has left it with much experience in determining the transition from direct rule to neo-colonial status. After all, the Irish Free State was one of its early successes in this field. Using this expertise, and availing of willing participants in the 26 Counties, they are undoubtedly already laying plans to ensure that a united Ireland remains embedded within the global free-market zone and supportive of imperialism.

This is not to say, of course, that the left should oppose the ending of partition. Breaking the constitutional

link with Britain must create a new set of conditions in the country as a whole, and all demanding answers. Would the population, for example, be satisfied with a health service not fit for purpose, prepared to accept a never-ending housing crisis, or remain content with the ever-increasing inequality between its citizens?

Worryingly, though, there are those who would see that the answer to these questions lies in crushing such demands by promoting an authoritarian, quasi-fascist regime. Rumbling or even orchestrated discontent within loyalism would provide a spurious excuse for doing so.

A simplistic agenda merely calling for a united Ireland risks just such a disastrous outcome. To counter the likelihood of this 21st-century carnival of reaction, the left has to be explicit about the type of united Ireland we want. It is vital, therefore, to campaign not only for an end to partition but for the establishment of an all-Ireland workers’ republic. After all, we still only want the earth. ★

1 George Osborne, “Unleashing nationalism has made the future of the UK the central issue,” *Evening Standard*, 20 January 2021 (<https://tinyurl.com/y6g6b5tr>).

2 Robert Shrimley, “Democratic Unionists are now Irish reunification’s secret weapon,” *Financial Times*, 20 January 2021

Far left: 1923 Ulster Unionist Council poster

Left: Cumann na nGaedheal was a precursor and merged with Fine Gael in 1933

development aid.”

The *Irish Independent* has exactly the same headline—“international development aid boss”—while the two papers agree with the provided text that she is “a world-renowned voice of conscience and moral clarity.”

RTE did not stray from the script either. “A crisis-tested public servant and diplomat,” it quoted from the exact same sources, “Ambassador Samantha Power has been a leader in marshalling the world to resolve long-running conflicts, respond to humanitarian emergencies, defend

human dignity, and strengthen the rule of law and democracy.”

So far, so Irish media. But it seems there is one dissenting voice; unfortunately, it is not an Irish voice. That voice comes from RT—scarcely a hotbed of dissent but nonetheless offering a distinctly critical view on many issues. “Interventionist Samantha Power is latest pick to serve in Joe Biden administration as USAID head,” it says. It goes on: “Power is best known for her ‘humanitarian’ interventionism advocacy. As an aide at the Obama White House, she

championed US intervention in Syria and Libya—where US-backed Islamist militants sought to overthrow secular governments—in the name of stopping ‘genocide’.”

Still, let’s give the last words (almost) to the heroine herself. “As a journalist, activist, and diplomat, I’ve seen the world-changing impact of USAID.” Indeed she has, and now she is going to oversee its continuing destructive force throughout the world. Just don’t expect to read about it in the Irish mouthpieces of US propaganda. ★

Campaign for an all-Ireland health service



Derry City and Strabane, Mid-Ulster, and Fermanagh and Omagh. It was narrowly defeated in Belfast City Council by the casting vote of the DUP chairperson.

The following motion will be voted on in Dublin City Council as we go to press: *The COVID-19 crisis presents an unprecedented threat to the public health of the people of Dublin. The members acknowledge and appreciate the tremendous efforts made by the Council to engage with, support and work with the Dublin City community through a variety of community initiatives undertaken by the Council at the start of the pandemic.*

The scale of the crisis clearly demonstrates the critical role of a fully funded and protected public health service. This Council agrees that two divergent public health strategies to deal with a pandemic on the island of Ireland, North and South, is irrational, impractical and dangerous. Council calls for a fully integrated all-Ireland public health strategy. Council supports the campaign for an all-Ireland health service free at the point of delivery from

the cradle to the grave. Further, this Council agrees to invite representatives from the All-Ireland Health Service campaign to make a presentation to Council.

The position document of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, “No Going Back: A New Deal towards a Safe and Secure Future for All,” sets out its post-pandemic aims as “a public healthcare system free at the point of use, an integrated properly funded health and social care system with a proactive system of public health.”

It goes on to state:

1 *This pandemic has shown that the public Healthcare system is singularly the delivery model of choice when the universal human right of people to healthcare and life itself is threatened.*

2 *We must build a universal public Healthcare system free at the point of use funded by taxation across the island of Ireland.*

3 *We must also reinvest in publicly provided long-term care and a proactive system of public health.*

The ICTU’s position is not a hundred miles from the aims of the Campaign for an All-Ireland National Health Service. Congress should develop its policy further into one of an all-Ireland fully funded health service, free at the point of entry.

JIMMY DORAN

THE CAMPAIGN for an all-Ireland public health service, fully funded and free at the point of entry, is gaining momentum around the country. Already three district councils in the North have supported the demand:

Capitalism is bad for our mental health

GRAHAM HARRINGTON

IRELAND’S MENTAL health crisis was already in a bad way before covid; now it’s getting even worse. Covid has not caused the crisis, it has only made it even more serious.

As quarantine conditions worsen, it’s becoming more apparent that isolation and alienation are a serious danger to human beings. Yet alienation is a central component of capitalism as a system.

As a species we are, out of necessity, social beings. We rely on one another to survive and live, whether nurses, teachers, cleaners, or bus-

drivers. Regardless of the system we live under, we rely on relations with others to survive. Yet it is this very social natural order that capitalism seeks to destroy.

For decades, “neo-liberalism” has developed an individualist culture, with myths about the “self-made man” and so on fostering an inherently egotistical view of human beings. In any society, the prevailing attitudes are not spontaneous but are the ideological reflection of the ruling class and the image it wants to promote of itself. It is no exaggeration to say that our present conditions, when capitalism is seemingly on the way out, are when, like a

cornered rat, it manages to cause the most moral damage.

We live in a culture whose defining features are such things as the selfie, social media, and individual identities, all coming together to unconsciously create a collective narcissism. To take some examples, in the 1970s punk music gave an expression to the frustrations of working-class youth and their anger at the status quo, until it was co-opted and commercialised. The same goes for rap and the hip-hop music of the 1990s: once it was commodified it became more about selling records than expressing ideas.

The education system does not promote critical thinking but instead repeats the ruling narrative that the only people we should model ourselves on are the “successful,” those whose wealth defines them. As these people by their very nature can only be a tiny

As quarantine conditions worsen, it's becoming more apparent that isolation and alienation are a serious danger to human beings. Yet alienation is a central component of capitalism as a system.

Trade unions need to become radical or they will become redundant.

As it stands, there are major areas of co-operation between the NHS in the North and the HSE in the South.

Radiotherapy services at the North-West Cancer Centre. People from both sides of the border are treated at the North-West Cancer Centre in Altnagelvin Area Hospital in Derry. Cancer patients from Co. Donegal have been able to avail of radiotherapy services here since November 2016. Almost four hundred people from the South have received their radiotherapy treatment at Altnagelvin.

Cross-border percutaneous coronary intervention services.

The primary percutaneous coronary intervention services have been operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, from May 2016. A cross-border policy on level of service was agreed by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and Saolta University Health Care Group. On average, seventy patients a year from Co. Donegal benefit from this life-saving care at Altnagelvin Hospital.

All-Ireland paediatric cardiology

number, it sends the message to the majority that they are not good enough.

The so-called "self-help" industry has churned out a massive number of publications aimed at giving people the silver bullet for fighting their insecurities. In reality, all that these millionaire motivational speakers and authors achieve is making a profit for themselves.

There is an even more dangerous pharmaceutical industry, which makes money off people with mental health difficulties. It goes without saying that the capitalist class, which makes money only so long as people are ill, are surely opposed to actually solving the root of the issue.

Is it so surprising that there are so many young, and some very young, people who have issues with anxiety, when all the media have to show is constant bad news—the environmental

services. This nationwide cardiology service is available at Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Crumlin, Dublin, established under a bilateral ministerial arrangement.

Human Milk Bank. Since reopening in December 2018, the Human Milk Bank has processed approximately 570 litres of donor-expressed milk, providing approximately 510 litres of breast milk to twenty-seven neonatal units in hospitals around Ireland, helping 278 babies.

Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT).

This is a partnership between the health and social care services in the North and the South of Ireland, which has facilitated cross-border collaborative working in health and social care for more than twenty-five years, supported by financial and personnel resources from the HSE.

The campaign for an all-Ireland health service is lobbying for the developing of existing cross-border co-operation into a unified public health service throughout the country. The NHS, as it exists in the North, has been eroded through years of underfunding, cuts, and privatisation; nevertheless the template remains as a model to be built on, on the

danger, for example? What makes it worse is that it's not made clear that such issues as the climate emergency don't happen because human beings are morally bad, or other esoteric nonsense, but in reality is directly a result of capitalism and its priority of profit. The achievements of socialism are hidden, so promoting the lie that there is no alternative.

Even among the left there is a prevailing sense of defeatism and despair. We have been fed a lie that individuals change the world, and this places a massive burden on left activists. It is class struggle that is the motor of history, and it is in class solidarity that we find a purpose, not in individual action. As long as we continue to look to Twitter, or setting up a podcast or Youtube, or whatever else is trendy, for expressing one's political convictions, we miss the point that it's what we do

principle of health services free at the point of provision, from the cradle to the grave.

The campaign seeks to develop an all-Ireland public health service that is financed from general taxation and under public control. Now is a unique moment to make this possible.

The Campaign for an All-Ireland National Health Service is based on the following principles:

- 1** Private hospitals requisitioned at the beginning of the covid-19 crisis to be nationalised.
- 2** Private practice and fees excluded from public hospitals.
- 3** Permanent public-sector-only contracts offered to new consultants.
- 4** Public ownership and control of voluntary hospitals, including the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin.
- 5** Reward payments and enhanced career structure for nurses and other health workers, north and south.
- 6** Publicly funded primary care that includes mental health support, physiotherapy, speech therapy, etc.
- 7** An integrated all-Ireland health and social care service.
- 8** A publicly established system to regulate access to and pricing of medicines throughout the country. ★

For further details contact campaigninhs@gmail.com

collectively that makes the difference.

The pandemic has only accelerated the crisis, with the mental health services, north and south, being starved of financing. People are working longer hours for less pay and living in homes where the rent is too high, only talking to one another on line. No wonder there is also a massive substance-abuse problem. In the Six Counties there have been as many deaths in the twenty years since the Belfast Agreement as there were in the three decades of armed conflict

Frantz Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the success of the oppressor lies in their ability to make the oppressed look at themselves in the way the oppressor views them. This can only be changed through a complete transformation of social relations, towards socialism. ★

Our work, mental health, and the disease of neoliberalism

BARRY MURRAY

EVEN OUR primate ancestors “worked”; they had “jobs”—not as we know them today but jobs nonetheless. And they “worked” to feed themselves and their offspring, just as we must do today. But of course they worked only to satisfy their needs: there was no working *for* someone, or being exploited.

Early human farming too was to survive; but then, with improving farming techniques, not only did humans begin to grow enough food for themselves but there was now a food surplus. The surplus food was sold or bartered. So began a momentous change for humans and their primitive societies.

This was one critical change from need to greed. It led to an evolution of hierarchies, class hierarchies, and ultimately jobs and employment but with it inequality and exploitation.

Today, work is presented as central to our lives, even normal. And for the majority it is; but that’s largely because

of how those in power have organised societies to benefit themselves and the elite few (1 per cent) who benefit from the labours of others. Having a job has taken on a special status, particularly a class status. It has become competitive, hierarchical, and exploitative.

There is a cultural “social hierarchy” of those who work and those who don’t. The unemployed, the ill and those who live on welfare benefits are often portrayed in society as lazy and are seen as part of a lower sub-culture.

There are class and intra-class tensions, which of course employers and the wealthy exploit, to their advantage. However, the reality for everyone in the present system of living is that they need money to survive—an income, a wage.

Even to maintain a very basic standard of living, few people can afford to “bite the hand that feeds them,” or “rock the boat,” even when they know well that they are wage slaves and are under constant pressure to perform at work and never be ill or stressed.

But in modern society there are even more pressures. People are encouraged, even fooled, into the idea that we need to “better ourselves.” We are led to believe that we “need” newer, bigger houses (even two), new cars, new clothes, new electronic gadgets, two or three holidays a year, and so on. In other words, our consumerism must be endless, to drive the system of capitalism and neoliberalism that we live under.

Making this a “normal” part of life is the job of advertising and the media. And they have done an excellent job on us. They even coined the term “shopping therapy”—as if it was some new-found cure for all our ills. Fashion, style, sexiness, status—all these are used in overt and subliminal ways to play on our emotions. Your life will be better if you “buy” or have this “thing.”

But the ultimate result is to get you to spend, and therefore drive profits. The impression is carefully cultivated that we have the freedom and the power to spend as we please. We are “empowered,” they tell us. But all this

‘Increasingly, workers find themselves powerless in the work-place. And this means precarious employment, zero-hour contracts, minimum wages, the smashing of workers’ unions, enforced by the law—all ensuring that workers are disempowered.’

has much deeper roots and consequences. Without doubt there are going to be “winners” and “losers” in this type of competitively created society, together with the resultant damage to mental and physical health.

To “keep pace” with “bettering ourselves” it’s going to be necessary for workers to compete ruthlessly in the job market to raise the finance to do this. But we are always confronted with the fact that the market that workers “sell their labour” in, and in which they are forced to be wage slaves, is stacked against them. They are at the mercy of this “wages market,” designed and controlled by the neoliberal system of competition, profit, exploitation, and ultimately inequality.

But what is this element of capitalism known as neoliberalism, and why does it affect our health, our society, our jobs, and what workers are paid? In his book *Insane Medicine*, Dr Sami Timimi wrote:

Neoliberalism refers to a way of organising our political and economic systems using a particular model of capitalism that promotes free market economics based around competition as the best way to organise and develop pretty much every aspect of society. It’s generally associated with policies of economic liberalisation that promote privatisation, deregulation, globalisation, free trade, austerity, and reductions in government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector across all sections of the economy.

Clearly, when (or if) you have a job you are in a “market,” and one way or another you have to “compete” for that job. If you don’t, there are lots of people who will. Again, this benefits the employer and the system that we live and work under, because businesses and employers too have to survive in this system: they will cut the work force, wages and corners to compete at their level. Small businesses compete against bigger businesses; bigger businesses compete against national businesses; and even nationally established businesses must compete against the transnational businesses and the globalised economy.

At every level it is the workers and jobs that sustain and are, in fact, the dynamos that drive these businesses. Without workers there are no businesses. However, it is the workers and jobs that suffer most, especially when the financial and business-development gurus decide that certain workers are costing too much and are deemed no longer “useful” to a business (read: more profit for the bosses).

Increasingly, workers find themselves powerless in the work-place. And this means precarious employment, zero-hour contracts, minimum wages, the smashing of workers’ unions, enforced by the law—all ensuring that workers are disempowered. All this was carefully planned and developed over a long period, and throughout the world; and all of it adds to the stress of living and

to diminished health. As Timimi wrote:

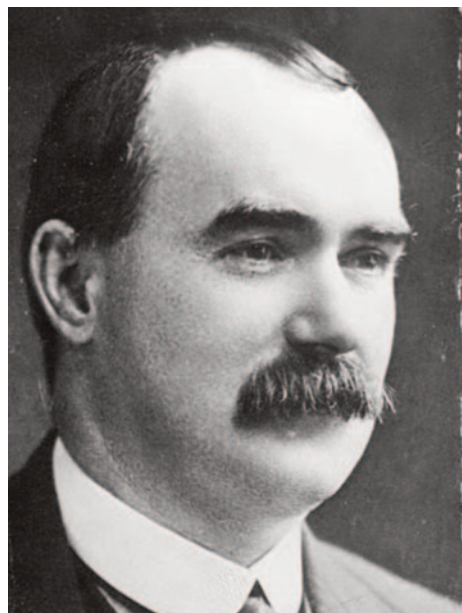
After Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan took power, the rest of the neoliberal package soon followed: massive tax cuts for the rich, the crushing of trade unions, deregulation, privatisation, and outsourcing and competition in public services. International financial and economic institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, soon prescribed similar policies. When the IMF or World Bank lent money to a developing economy it now came with neoliberal strings attached, forcing their governments to adopt these policies as conditions of loans, thereby pushing the global economy to become increasingly structured by neoliberal ideology.

Even governments are constrained and ruled by their neoliberal moneylenders. But workers and the poor pay the ultimate price.

“Neoliberalism preys on the labour of the weakest to enhance the lives of the richest. Big business takes the profits; the state keeps the risk.”

Meanwhile workers compete against each other for the crumbs. Perfectly good people become desperate to survive and resort to “survival of the fittest” strategies to curry favour with employers or the system they are now dependent on. Physical and mental health issues are the consequence. ★

■ The second half of this article will be published next month.



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Water is a human right



RAYMOND Ó DUBHGHAILL

AT THE END of 2020 the water “futures” of California, the largest state in the United States in population and economy, were floated on Wall Street for the first time, under the banner of Nasdaq Veles California Water Index.¹ It was the first flotation of its kind, offering potential investors the opportunity to hedge against the future availability of water in California: in simple terms, to get rich from the scarcity of the most important substance for all human, animal and plant life to survive.

But while it may be the first of its kind, we can be sure that it won't be the last.

The commodification of water is a war against working people

Of course the commodification of water is nothing new²: a look in the fridge of your local corner shop or supermarket will reveal bottles of water with any number of different labels—all ultimately owned by the

same two or three companies.³ However, no less pernicious is the taking into private ownership of public water resources and infrastructure, a malign practice in which—predictably enough—the decaying imperialist behemoth of the United States leads the way.

In 2013 the then CEO of Nestlé, the world's largest food and drink company, drew widespread criticism when he described water as “not a human right” but “a foodstuff like any other, which should have a commercial value.”⁴

In 2018 it was reported that, with the city of Flint, Michigan, facing a continuing crisis and public health emergency in relation to its water supply, in which up to 12,000 children in the predominantly black working-class city were poisoned with lead,⁵ Nestlé continued to pump out 400 gallons per minute of groundwater to bottle and to sell, for an annual administration fee of a mere \$200 to the local government.⁶

The struggle for public ownership of water in Ireland

The Right2Water Campaign at its peak, between 2014 and 2016, struck at the heart of capitalism and its champions in the political class in Ireland.⁷ The demands were simple: no water charges for domestic water usage, and a referendum to enshrine in the constitution the ownership of Ireland's water by the people of Ireland.

While the first demand has been met, we can be certain that this is just a temporary state of affairs while the ur-reactionaries of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil and their slíbhín accomplices in the Green Party continue to hold power, probably at first under the guise of “excessive usage charges.”⁸ Securing the second, more fundamental demand should be the focus of any truly transformative, anti-capitalist strategy.

It's important to note that the move to privatise water in Ireland in the last decade was driven by the EU Commission's Water Framework Directive, under the spurious justification of “improving water quality.”⁹ As the example of Flint shows, the very opposite is likely to be the case. As we can see in any walk of life—whether transport, health, or housing—there is an inherent contradiction between quality and profitability.

Climate change, capitalism, and the international context

The internal logic of capitalism—the pursuit of increased growth and profitability above all else—forces it not only to over-exploit natural resources in the pursuit of short-term profit but to exploit in turn the resulting scarcity of resources for its own benefit.

The perverse image of Wall Street traders gambling on the scarcity of water is a microcosm of the wider state of affairs, where big corporations can steal clean water from the commons, or ownership by the people, to sell back at a premium in bottled form, where people die of lead poisoning, drought, and any number of water-borne illnesses, a fate reserved only for the most exploited of working people around the globe.

The battle to secure the public ownership of water in Ireland has only begun. But the international dimension

It's important to note that the move to privatise water in Ireland in the last decade was driven by the EU Commission's Water Framework Directive, under the spurious justification of "improving water quality."

of this struggle cannot be ignored. As the effects of climate change get worse, increases in drought and famine are inevitable on a global scale.¹⁰ It is clear that capitalism is incapable of arresting this alarming slide, precisely because capitalism is what caused it in the first place.¹¹ If left unaddressed, it is not the bourgeois class who will reap the bitter fruit and bear the brunt of their exploitative practices but working people.

As the rate of profit continues to fall,¹² and we enter another global economic crisis, the capitalists will manoeuvre in ever more desperate ways to fight the tides and maintain their bottom line. The key to this will be continuing to stake out private control over resources and infrastructures that were previously considered as the commons, or belonging to the people.

We must be steadfast and clear in opposing this, and in ensuring the public ownership of all natural resources for our generation and all generations to come. ★

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Mel Corry 1964–2021

Mel Corry, who died on 13 January, was a lifelong trade unionist, a member of the Peadar O'Donnell Socialist Republican Forum, and a former member of the National Executive Committee of the CPI. A native of Lurgan and former textile worker, from 2008 he was a tutor with Trademark in Belfast, providing political education for trade unions. He was an inspirational teacher, who worked tirelessly in the service of his class.

Ba cheardchumanaí ar feadh a shaoil é Mel Corry, a fuair bás ar 13 Eanáir. Ba bhall é d'Fhóram Poblachtach Sóisialach Pheadair Uí Dhónaill agus iarbhall de Choiste Feidhmiúcháin Náisiúnta an CPI. B'as an Lorgain dó, agus chaith sé seal mar oibrí i dtionscal na dteicstílí. Ón mbliain 2008 ba theagascóir é le Trademark i mBéal Feirste, ag cur oideachas polaitiúil ar fáil do cheardchumainn. Ba mhúinteoir spreagúil é a d'oibrigh gan staonadh i seirbhís a aicme.



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MONOPOLY

Social media immoderation

GEARÓID DE PAOR

MODERN ON-LINE social media are a continuing large-scale social experiment as much as we want to consider them a norm of modern life.

Whenever the debate on the effects, drawbacks or benefits of on-line social media arises, there is always an attempt to draw analogies with physical social spaces, such as a public square or perhaps the village community centre. Social media, as they exist now, are far from being either of these. If you show

up in those places, or behave in an abusive or anti-social manner, you'll be abruptly escorted away by the community. Existing social media are more akin to the squares all being privately owned, advertisements everywhere, and cameras recording everything that's said and done. The owner is all too happy to leave people to make a scene and shout abuse if it draws the attention of the crowd to their square and to the advertisements.

Lately some of the owners have seen fit to clean up a small amount of the abusive behaviour they see as the

worst—and some of those abusive users complain of “censorship.” All the while everyone else still has to try to avoid the raving lunatics and racists as they navigate the square. Shouldn't it be up to the community to keep their square in order, not the capitalists who enable and even encourage these sorts of spectacles?

The analogy with a public square is lacking, but there are truths to the comparison. We have certain expectations of social interactions in public spaces: an ability to moderate what occurs, an ability to defend or

In pursuit of monopoly, and the alternative

GEARÓID DE PAOR

FOR ALMOST a decade Facebook has aggressively set out to acquire a monopoly in the field of social media communications. Popular communications platforms, such as Instagram and Whatsapp, which rivalled Facebook's own services, were acquired (in 2012 and 2014, respectively), to consolidate the market and ultimately to profit from a captive audience locked behind “walled gardens” and unable to communicate between platforms.

This is a standard tactic for almost all existing competitors, whether Whatsapp, Telegram, iMessage, or others. A user of Whatsapp can only communicate with other users of Whatsapp. This is even an issue for the non-profit Signal messenger, although admittedly we can

more readily rely on it for privacy and security. Signal openly publish their source code for public inspection and auditing—unlike the various profit-seeking alternatives, which proclaim that they honour privacy while neither proving it nor permitting us to prove it ourselves through inspection.

Various companies have been clamouring to dominate the market, forgoing immediate profits to build dominant market share, locking out any co-operation, transparency, or interoperability. This is not a feature unique to instant-messaging applications: in fact it is a standard feature of capitalist production. The pattern has happened before, with railway operators owning and controlling separate tracks and attempting to maintain monopolies on routes to try to gain the upper hand and force out all

other competitors.

Obviously this was no benefit to the traveller of the time having to deal with separate companies for separate routes with separate tickets. Ultimately the trains were nationalised to overcome this mess and inefficiency.

Why is it considered normal to maintain private, inefficient standards in a field where history shows us the obvious technological advances that come from co-operation and standardisation? People expect to be able to telephone between different operators, replace a bolt in a machine when it breaks, or to send and receive email to any address. None of this standardisation, co-operation or interoperability is of any benefit to a capitalist if they stand the chance of developing a monopoly. They will fight against it every step of the way, for the sake of profit. Capitalist governments are only too happy to let it all play out again in a different field if there's a dividend for investors.

The only group pursuing an interoperable standard appearing in the

A service as vital as instant messaging should not be left to capitalists, who only want to gain dominant market share so as to profit from selling our data or our attention

intervene. With existing social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and so on, all this power has been privatised. The power has been taken away from the community; the only power left is to politely ask them to remove a few of the most egregiously offensive individuals and groups, and cross our fingers that it isn't too unprofitable for them to permit it.

Community-owned social networks

Perhaps social media can align more with our existing social norms and be like a community centre. Certainly there are people making efforts in this space—perhaps in a more techno-anarchist approach than a state-supported public structure, but they do exist.

An impetus for these alternatives was created a few years ago following Twitter's refusal to prevent continuous hate speech from the far right, especially that which targeted members of the transgender community.

The most well-known and most successful of these approaches are Mastodon and Pleroma. These gave communities the ability to create and

space is the British-registered CIC Matrix.org, essentially a modern standard for encrypted instant communications, something to herd the capitalists into standardisation and co-operation. They offer the same transparency as Signal, in publishing their source code for public inspection and auditing, with the additional advantage of allowing users to operate their own server while permitting communication to other servers, similar to email. Unfortunately, the capitalists have much more financial clout and advertising power than this “community interest company,” so Matrix is unknown to most people who use instant-messaging applications.

A service as vital as instant messaging should not be left to capitalists, who only want to gain dominant market share so as to profit from selling our data or our attention; neither should it be left to small non-profits like Signal or Matrix putting an ideal first, only to be crushed by the weight and inefficiency of markets. The state should be leading research to provide for the needs of the people,

moderate their own social networks, and a way to keep the far right out and prevent them spreading their poisonous bile, but also to co-operate and communicate with other communities sharing the same values.

A sample of these communities can be found at <https://joinmastodon.org/communities>, but more exist besides these: communities for LGBTQ+ activists, leftists, hacker communities, and so on. They can each choose to permit communications with other communities that share similar values or exclude those that don't. Of course the ability to independently create communities and to moderate them as they wish also allows the far right to set up their own. But every other community still retains the power to keep them out.

Clearly this is an improvement over privately owned social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, having absolute power to choose what is permitted; but these communities have remained niche and not well known without the capital to grow these networks that comes from advertising and investors. Just like any community endeavour, these community-

building a publicly owned and transparent communications standard, giving users the security and privacy they assume they already have but in reality don't.

The efforts of Signal and Matrix can only be welcomed. We know from the history of communications that we can't assume security from private companies. We must assume that bad actors have their hands in the pockets of Whatsapp, Telegram etc. thanks to their lack of transparency. We know from examples such as Crypto AG that the state security services of major capitalist countries take an interest in subverting encrypted platforms for communication, including for spying on other countries. We shouldn't be hoping for capitalists to act in our best interests against their own profits.

It is revealing that the French state has replaced the use of Whatsapp and Telegram throughout the government with their own system, based on Matrix, as well as Germany using the same technology within the areas of health, education, and the army. Any claims of

controlled social networks rely instead on the labour of volunteers, the donation of resources, and the dedication of a community working together to succeed.

We can't expect that local government grants will be forthcoming for community social networks in the way they are for community halls; but putting social life back under the control of the community is a step in the right direction. The far right has benefited from the immoderation of private social media, just as private social media have profited from the attention the far right has brought to them. Communal control can take that power back to the people. ★

Further information

- Information on how these networks work, and how a community can establish their own server, can be found at Mastodon, “Social networking, back in your hands” (<https://joinmastodon.org>).
- Or to see how it works on a general server provided by the main developers go to <https://mastodon.online>, or see a sample of communities at <https://joinmastodon.org/communities>.

care for privacy and security from Whatsapp and Telegram are little more than hollow attempts to brand their products differently so as to appeal to a new “privacy-conscious” target market. There is no need to trust them or hope they will act in our best interests against their own profits.

The alternatives of Matrix and Signal allow us to inspect the code and audit the security and privacy, as well as to host our own services, as is the case with Matrix. Users of instant-messaging services must be encouraged to abandon the likes of Whatsapp and Telegram in favour of Signal and Matrix. Moving forward, these technologies can lay the basis for a co-operative, transparent international standard. ★

Further information

- To quickly get started with Matrix using their servers: <https://element.io/>
- For more information on Matrix, including how to set up your own server: <https://matrix.org/>
- To quickly get started with Signal using their servers: <https://signal.org>

Vietnam rebuilds

GRAHAM HARRINGTON

ON 25 JANUARY 2021 the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam will open in Hanoi. The congress takes place against the background of Vietnam's successes against covid-19, with fewer than 1,500 cases and 35 deaths (at the time of writing) in a country of 95 million.

This is not simply due to Vietnam's health policies but also to how health is secondary to profit. A report by the UN Development Programme notes that 89 per cent of the Vietnamese people supported the state's priority of public health over the economy. Globally, only 67 per cent said the same.

The Vietnamese liberation struggle was one of the defining events of the twentieth century. Vietnamese

communists managed to defeat Japanese occupation in the Second World War, leading to the August Revolution, where Ho Chi Minh, a founder-member of the French Communist Party and later first leader of the Vietnamese communists and people, declared Vietnam's independence from Japanese and French colonialism.

With the help of the British, France regained its colonies in Indochina, leading to the Vietnamese continuing their independence war. In 1954 French imperialism suffered a humiliating defeat in the battle at Dien Bien Phu at the hands of Vietnamese forces led by General Vo Nguyen Giap.

Not long afterwards Vietnam was partitioned, with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north, headed by Ho Chi Minh, and the south ruled by pro-Western tyrants.

The rest is history. The Vietnamese National Liberation Front, along with the North Vietnamese People's Army, fought against the United States in one of the most heroic showdowns against imperialism. By 1975, US imperialism and its allies had dramatically fled the country, scrambling onto helicopters as the communists liberated Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City).

The Vietnamese revolutionaries had suffered hundreds of thousands dead,

Let's move forward!



SAJEEV KUMAR

SCIENTISTS AND environmentalists, decades ago, warned the world of an impending global pandemic. Those in the corridors of power who paid no heed to it are now surprised and shocked. Scientists have raised the alarm over a greater catastrophe endangering our very survival on this

planet, namely climate change, nuclear war, and artificial intelligence.

All of these are caused, directly or indirectly, by humans. Humans have inhabited this planet for thousands of years; so when we say humans are the cause we mean the exploitative mode of production that humans have developed during the last five hundred years, which cares about nothing except profit.

Covid-19 has exposed the inherent economic crisis, the growing inequality among people, the environmental repercussions of the system based on profit, our unpreparedness to face a global emergency, and the inadequacy of our health services.

How will the post-covid world be? It could move towards a surveillance state, where every movement is scrutinised, on

the pretext of controlling pandemics, or towards a more egalitarian system, in which health services and education could be accessible to everyone. Which way it will go depends on the balance of power between the classes.

We have to organise society in a radically different way, one in which use values, such as health, housing, and education, are not put through the exchange value system, accessible only to those who can afford them.

Health is no longer an issue for the individual: it's a social issue. For you to be healthy your neighbour also has to be healthy, which makes it mandatory to have more public expenditure on health than on the military. Instead of the military it should be an army of doctors—as the Cubans have shown—who should march on foreign lands to help suffering people.

What is interesting is that Vietnam's reforms have actually strengthened the state or public sector's control of the economy.

killed in fighting or in massacres, and industry devastated by US bombing and Agent Orange biological warfare. What allowed them to win was the communist leadership, which had given direction to the disparate independence forces and managed to get the backing of the people for a revolutionary struggle. Ho had seen—much like James Connolly—that a socialist had to be a patriot, that only socialism could lead to true independence.

After unification Vietnam had to endure Western sanctions, as well as attacks from the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia (backed by the West as well as China), which was carrying out genocide that was only stopped when the Vietnamese militarily intervened, in turn provoking an invasion from China in 1979.

Vietnam's "war communism" had meant that while Vietnam had built a basically egalitarian society it did so without any industrial base and a low standard of living, prompting the *doi moi* ("restoration") reforms in 1986, which allowed for a small scale of private trading.

The counter-revolution in the USSR meant that Vietnam was forced to step up its reforms by the turn of the century. Vietnam calls its economy a "socialist-oriented market economy." Much like the way the Scandinavian countries

allow a strong welfare state in order to strengthen their capitalism, Vietnam—along with China and Laos—allows a strong private, capitalist sector to strengthen its socialism.

Bill Hayton, in his book *Vietnam: Rising Dragon*, states:

Some might snicker at the official description of a "socialist-oriented market economy" but it's not an empty slogan. Even today, the Communist Party retains control over most of the economy: either directly through state-owned enterprises which monopolise key strategic sectors, through joint ventures between the state sector and foreign investors, or increasingly, through the elite networks which bind the Party to the new private sector.

What is interesting is that Vietnam's reforms have actually strengthened the state or public sector's control of the economy. As Hayton writes,

in every other communist country that has embarked on economic transition, the proportion of the economy controlled by the state has fallen. In Vietnam it actually rose: from 39 per cent in 1992 to 41 percent in 2003—and these figures exclude foreign-invested firms, which were usually joint ventures with SOEs [state-owned enterprises].

Along with the state sector is a massive co-operative movement, which

now has more than 8 million members.

In effect, the capitalist sector, which does exist in Vietnam, is kept under control by the Communist Party and the state. Capitalism in embryo has existed in every socialist country that has existed and that arose out of capitalism. Even in the Soviet Union in its later years capitalism existed *de facto* in a second economy.

In recent years the current general secretary of the Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, has launched an anti-corruption drive, aimed at breaking up networks in the party and state that have developed links with the growing capitalist class. The new-found wealth has allowed negative tendencies, such as nepotism, corruption, individualism, and general capitalist morality, to infect the CPV, and combating this has been the main part of the anti-corruption drive, leading to the downfall of the pro-liberalisation prime minister Tan Dung in particular.

The CPV maintains its legitimacy through the use of such measures as the "Grassroots Democracy Decree," whereby peasants decide on a local budget, on the mass organisations, such as the People's Committees and Women's Union, as well as the *dan pho* or residents' committees, trade unions, and others, all included in the Vietnamese Fatherland Front. ★

Climate change

Marx mentions the metabolic rift and says that the capitalist system exploits not only human labour power but also nature, which is the basis of all wealth. John Bellamy Foster says that if world consumption of resources per capita is like the United States, the planet can accommodate only 1.3 billion people (at present 7 billion). The limited resources have to be used economically in an environmentally sustainable way without creating a metabolic rift.

The capitalist system has its own laws of motion. It is based on competition, cost-effective production, and improving productive forces for the maximising of profit. The system encourages freedom of capital and freedom of movement of labour but prevents freedom from exploitation

(nature and labour), which will not help in a crisis of the environment and economy. Hence we need to organise the world in a different way, in which resources and benefits in the improvisation of productive forces are shared in a sustainable way.

Socialism v. barbarism

The transformation of society does not happen naturally in a deterministic way. In her book *The Origin of Capitalism*, Ellen Meiksins Wood says that European capitalism (in England) is one of the many outcomes of transformation from feudalism. The same feudalism gave rise to absolutism in France.

Similarly the transformation from capitalism to socialism is also not deterministic; as Rosa Luxemburg said, it could be socialism or barbarism. If

we, with our theory, won't organise and intervene to make the change, it can give rise to many undesirable possibilities. With so many countries having nuclear capabilities, it might be the end of civilisation.

Organisation is the bridge between theory and praxis. We have to organise, adhering to Marxist and Leninist principles, to create a progressive society. If we let bourgeois ideology dilute ours through reformist, opportunist or extremist tendencies, capitalism will devour even the present minimal democracy and heave us centuries backwards.

So let us organise on Marxism-Leninism, realise what Marx said, that nature is our "inorganic body," that we are not apart from nature but a part of it, and so move forward towards a better, humane society. ★



JENNY FARRELL

GEORGE BERNARD Shaw wrote: “Keats achieved the very curious feat of writing a poem of which it may be said that if Karl Marx can be imagined writing a poem instead of a treatise on Capital, he would have written *Isabella*.” The 200th anniversary of Keats’s death this month is an opportunity to celebrate this revolutionary romantic.

The English, American and French Revolutions had hailed the irreversible arrival of capitalism. Conservative governments throughout Europe understood and feared the implications of these revolutions and reacted with an increased suppression of democratic movements. Britain, already a bourgeois society, now feared insurrection by the working class, becoming increasingly repressive itself.

Romanticism is the first expression of the radical self-criticism of industrial capitalist society. In its most advanced writers, such as Shelley, the vision reaches beyond capitalism and supports the first working-class movements.

Byron used his first speech in the House of Lords in 1812 to side with the working people against government tyranny. Keats stands alongside Shelley and Byron against the enslavement and destruction of humanity.

Here are the stanzas Shaw refers to:

With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt,
Enriched from ancestral merchandize,
And for them many a weary hand did swelt
In torched mines and noisy factories,
And many once proud-quiver’d loins did melt
In blood from stinging whip;—with hollow eyes
Many all day in dazzling river stood,
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,
And went all naked to the hungry shark;
For them his ears gush’d blood; for them in death
The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark
Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe
A thousand men in troubles wide and dark:
Half-ignorant, they turn’d an easy wheel,
That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel.

Keats describes ruthless global exploitation, something we easily recognise today: in mines, in factories, in rivers, and the sea. While these stanzas are unusually direct for Keats, he evokes an aspect that becomes increasingly central to his poetic idea: how the human senses are destroyed in what he refers to as the “barbaric age” of capitalism. He captures and depicts these times as inappropriate to humanity.

“Ode to a Nightingale” describes an unnatural world:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Beauty evolves as Keats’s measure for a humane world. A profit-driven society that insatiably pursues money at all costs, including brutal repression and wars, destroys beauty. In a society like this “the Ceylon diver . . . went all naked to the hungry shark; | For them his ears gush’d blood”; and here “but to think is to be full of sorrow.” Yet despite it all Keats shows that beauty arises as human potential, over and over again with every new generation. And beauty is felt through the senses.

For Keats fully realised that human potential means that humans can appreciate the world through their senses. Capitalism destroys these senses: loins and ears gush blood, eyes are hollow, eyes are leaden.

While the reader has to activate mentally all senses to “live” the images, the actuality of this potential lies in the future. The building-blocks exist. Humanity has the ability to experience with all its senses the beauty of a humanised world. In the world as it is, this potential is thwarted: “Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes.”

Keats focused his poetics on what defines a truly human world, a place where humans are at one with themselves and their environment. He believed that human beings could develop their full sensual potential only in a world with which they were at one. In the world of nineteenth-century Britain and Europe, this was patently impossible.

Keats explores the nature of this beauty in his great odes of 1819. It is a beauty that is intrinsically tied to life as it should be, where humans and nature are in complete harmony with one another, where beauty is dynamic, changeable, in process, and includes its fulfilment. Beauty is life in tune with itself. It is dialectical, natural, and nurturing. This is Keats’s truth.

Part and parcel of Keats’s understanding of beauty is his programmatic attack on the denial of sensual pleasure by Christian religion. Like Shelley and Byron, Keats saw the reactionary role played by the Christian churches in nineteenth-century revolutionary Europe as intrinsically anti-life. Sensuousness marks Keats’s entire work and inspired artists like Harry Clarke to create the stained-glass window illustration of *The Eve of St Agnes* at a time when the denial of the physical senses and sexual pleasure was equally suppressed in Ireland of the early 1920s.

John Keats is one of the greatest English writers; he was a revolutionary poet whose vision reaches far into the future. He died two hundred years ago, on 23 February, aged only twenty-five. ★

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