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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: review_editor@platypus1917.org. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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last instance... Capitalism, sexism, racism, neo-coercion, no determination from the economy, or perhaps more or secondarily contradiction, no base-superstructure, no end to economics: There is no private revolution.

Let me therefore put these up for debate: versus revolution.

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ionalism, anti-semitism, and many other processes of marginalization, exploitation, and oppression all compose an ensemble of forms of domination. They are interrelated, of course, at times promoting each other, at other times opposing each other. However one can never deduce the temporal or logical priority of one of these elements.

2. No division into "political politics" and "everyday politics": Reproductive and nurturing labor needs to be made visible and distributed fairly. Our daily lives are a terrain for political struggle. The private sphere is neither subordinated nor of secondary importance to political struggle. Demands for a just organization of housework and child-rearing, and for solidarity care are not merely meant to present women or other excluded persons with equal access to the sphere of "real" politics; it's rather the other way round so that men and other privileged people are forced back into the sphere of "real" politics.

3. No fear of your own success: Progress in the fight against a relation of domination is not invalidated by the fact that it does not come about at the same time with success in the struggle against all forms of domination. The feminist revolution of 1968 is not less revolutionary because capitalism was not abolished at the same time. That is not to say that our own success cannot be integrated and domesticated or that individual forms of liberation in the end cannot have an ambivalent or ironic outcome. Those who claim, however, that post-68 forms of liberation have not really changed anything, or, even worse, have been the harbingers of post-Fordist or post-modern labor relations, merely continue the privileging and prioritizing of transformations of a so-called "base." Those purporting the priority of some totality are really always only concerned with some part, namely the economy, and only a certain part of the economy.

4. No "tabula rasa" and no catharsis: Since we face a multitude of relatively autonomous forms of domination that are not congruent with one another, it follows that the idea that one simple "rupture" will radically alter reality is unrealistic and misleading. There are always several fronts at which we need to fight, several alliances and enmities. The term "revolution" either needs to be given up upon entirely or reformulated in such a way that it can include the heterogeneous temporalities of emancipatory movements.

5. There are no longer any barricades: We must not conceive of all forms of domination in the same way that we conceive of capitalism. Some forms of domination constitute antagonistic oppositions; some are intimate and run through our own bodies (such as gender dualism). There are militants within bourgeois institutions and enemies in my bed. Some demands can be put into rights, others require changes of attitude; some struggles aim at changing a material regime, others at a cultural or symbolic one. Relations between parents and children are relations of domination. But these relations cannot be solved by the guillotine or through tax incentives that reduce them to problems of economics. Such issues can only be adequately resolved through the recognition of specific needs of the subaltern.

6. Put an end to aniconism: We need to develop and establish new relationships in the here and now. These forms of how we want to live need to be tried, reflected upon, revised, and published. There is no reason why we need to wait for the day after the revolution. We can begin now.

7. Occupy your life: What is truly exciting and encouraging in global protest movements that we are currently witnessing is precisely that they take seriously the specific aesthetics of existence which rest in activism. It seems that, from the beginning of the Occupy movement, discussions about the organization of our everyday lives have played a major role; from the beginning the activists have not pushed aside the cultural dimension of protest, but rather affirmed it. In almost all documents from Occupy, the experience of living together collectively is emphasized, the experience of sleeping in tents, of debating, gathering, and the emotions and affects related to it. Occupy rejects the interpellation of a personified addressee or the fiction of a grand social subject. And as a side effect, Occupy showed that activism need not be ascetic or sad, but that there is a lot to win even today, once we set up together a new and defiant life.

Janine Wissler: Far from having reached a historical nadir, the contradictions today loom so large that, on the contrary, the Left and anti-capitalist politics should be able to relate much better to the social consciousness than was the case during Fordism. That is, in times of huge growth rates, when many parts of society could, in one way or another, get something out of the growth, when there was an actual improvement of the quality of life, the contradictions in the system are less obvious. It seems obvious to many people that our current social and economic problems will never be solved if the prevailing power and property relations remain intact. The Occupy and Blockupy protests, the latter with about 25,000 participants, are great developments. However, I also argue that, especially in Germany, social movements have had great difficulties gaining a foothold.

I would follow Thomas's definition of the term "resistance." There are different forms of resistance, which can be concerned with single issues, can be long-lasting, can be very individualized, or can take place on a mass scale in the shape of social movements. It is the task of the Left therefore to endorse these kinds of resistance and to lead them in a way from the concrete to the universal. It should be made obvious that it doesn't make sense in the end to just fight the symptoms of a sick system. How can you put an entire system into

question though? It doesn't work to merely win reforms and improvements step by step and then hope to arrive at a better society. Reforms can be taken back; indeed, the last few years in particular showed that advancements once gained can be taken back, so that the universal does have its limitations.

In the last few years and decades struggles for positive reforms have not had priority, rather we have only witnessed defensive struggles, which were meant to impede political setbacks. There were no mass protests that raised demands which pointed beyond the status quo. We can see this in struggles within higher learning or at workplaces. It seems that the fight for positive reforms has retreated into the defensive and the term "reform" has been perverted completely. If you think of reforms today, you think of deterioration, and not of anything positive.

If we do talk of reform and revolution, however, reformist parties should be criticized for never raising the issue of what stands in the way of social movements and for never properly addressing what keeps people from fighting for their interests together. The reason for this oversight is that the dominant principle within reformism is that you make policies for people, as their proxies. The idea seems totally lost that you can fight for self-emancipation, i.e. that people can engage in politics by fighting for their rights themselves, by making policies on their own.

I concur with the critique of economism. Nevertheless, it is actually important to discuss how exploitative and oppressive regimes are interrelated, and how they condition one another. I also agree with the sentiment that the fights against racism and against the oppression of women are independent struggles. It would, of course, be wrong to deduce everything out of the class struggle. We do need to consider where we can find correlations. I, for example, cannot imagine how women are supposed to be free in an unfree society and vice versa. That is why Daniel's arguments seem absolute. There are seemingly naturally objective reasons why it makes sense socially that women are not equal to men, but if you get rid of the economic reason, you erase the objective foundation of inequality. We need to reflect on how we can link the struggle for the equality of women with the fight for a better society. History has shown that it was precisely during times of revolutionary upheavals that women were able to gain the most rights. Think only of 1918 when women gained the vote. Those were times when you had progressive developments and revolutionary situations all across society. Thus, we need to discuss those issues alongside one another without regressing back to the old debate around secondary contradictions, as such debates are harmful to the Left.

TS: I feel thrown back into the old debates of the 70s. Back then, I always used to say the same things that Daniel said just now, and they were always the vantage point of my politics. But we are in the year 2012 now; we have accumulated a lot of experience since the 70s.

There was a time when politics was defined as what the party does against the state and capital, always under the leadership of men, and everything else remained part of the private sphere, at best a secondary contradiction, to be dealt with after the revolution. To counter this, the dualism of micro- and macro-politics was introduced, which defined the entire micropolitical field as an area of resistance. All the old questions remain, though, and you're not an economist if you stress that. There are different forms of domination, and they all follow their own logic. Of course, capitalism is not the only system of domination. But it is an essential one (but certainly not the only one) that runs through all the other ones. If you deny this fact, only the left-liberal position remains, which at best aims at taming the anarchy of capitalism.

Let me introduce the old, "evil" Leninist dualism of trade unionism versus politics. Trade unionism includes everything we accumulate spontaneously in our everyday lives, which is then articulated, e.g. in union demands. This was to be done away with and replaced by what the party dictated. Looked at from today's point of view, this is of course a flawed position. However, there is a moment contained in it in which we can rediscover our experiences of the last 30 years: The division into trade unionism versus politics also meant the division of those who could not see beyond their own interests, who could only focus on their specific grievances, and were unable to offer more resistance. Lenin coined the term economism for the labor movement of his time, but you can also speak of a trade unionism of women, the youth, the sick, and of ecologists—it is a real problem that needs to be transcended. You need to move beyond this and constitute yourself as a political subject. I believe that those who set out to oppose the SDS have themselves been corrupted and gotten stuck in a specific trade unionism of their own. That doesn't diminish their activities. Still, we need to ask how an entire generation could become saturated with questions of better child daycare and changed gender relations, which have all changed so dramatically. And, once again, we need to re-pose the question of the political subject who arises to fight in the name of all.

NT: Naturally I reject the accusation of economism. Driving this sort of attack is a truncated understanding of capitalism and its underlying features. It makes a difference whether I speak of a capitalist society whose basic process is the logic of the value form, or whether I say, "Everything is determined economically." Those are entirely different things. There is a historically specific character to this society which is comprised in this way of being constantly "driven," of this compulsion to constant acceleration, this necessity of always overthrowing everything, including the means of production, and penetrating all of society with capitalist relations. In no way is this merely an economic relationship, but relates to the most intimate human relationships, in other words, to the way in which people interact with one another. When we speak of subjects who understand themselves to be in constant competition and who have to act accordingly, then we're speaking of human beings who are forced to objectify the world and themselves. We can observe this at its most obvious in the fact that I need to sell myself day after day as the commodity labor power. But things reach even farther: the need to objectify

yourself and face the world as an objective process, i.e. facing something that is objectively alien to you—that's something specific to capitalism, and which penetrates all forms of domination that persist in it. In other words, it's not just about some sort of "economic process," but rather about something that preconditions all social relations, and is thus also not easily grasped as it operates prior to everyday relations and actions. That's reflected in the way people think about society. For example, the construction of a collective subject such as "the nation" is a form of metaphysics, i.e. when I identify with a meta-subject and I consequently submit myself to it. In this close way of looking at things we realize that it naturally does not have anything to do with economism but with the way I behave toward this society.

The "perverseness" of the term "reform" that Janine talked about expresses itself in the fact that the historical process which expedited reforms and allowed greater latitude within bourgeois-capitalist society has exhausted itself. The shift of the dynamic of capitalist accumulation to the financial markets has taken place because it saw in this move a strategy to avoid this underlying crisis of capitalism for a few decades. Not only has the latitude been narrowed, but the balance of power has also shifted in a way such that what once was meant by reform, i.e. gaining social rights and leeway in labor relations, does not work anymore. That's what is meant when we talk of the "perverseness" of the term "reform."

DL: I'll grant you this: I, too, support the abolition of capitalism. What I find problematic, however, is the deduction of some kind of priority of the economic sphere before all other forms of domination, be they of a temporal or of a logical nature. The autonomy of struggles means that there are various autonomous, overlapping spheres that mutually influence one another, but there is just no prioritization. The belittlement of micropolitics overlooks the seriousness of those forms of domination and how difficult it is to change things on a small scale. Have you ever tried changing yourself? This is the toughest thing of all!

Foucault did not refuse to face the totality. He simply answered this challenge differently, by opposing the brand of Marxist thought that was dominant in the Communist Party of France, which took as its basic premise the category of the social totality. It was this that Foucault countered with the belief that micropolitics were heterogeneous and constituted local power relations which you have to resist locally as well as globally.

There are two dangers for the Left: corruption and conformity. The institutionalization of the Left can cause it to lose and betray its own ideals. That is what it needs to look out for and develop mechanisms to counter. The second danger is that of conformity or Stalinism. This is what Foucault opposed. When Thomas says, even after all the experience of avant-garde politics, that we should strive to achieve socialism "by any means necessary," my alarm rings! The concept of the political needs to be reflected on critically; the experiences of Stalinism as a temptation for the Left demands reflection. We do definitely exclude some "means!"

JW: I believe that even struggles for the most minor improvements, such as better child daycare, are absolutely legitimate and necessary. The question is rather whether we stop at those.

In her essay "Reform or Revolution," Rosa Luxemburg makes clear that she does not confront those matters as contradictions. On the contrary, in the fight for reforms we sow the seeds of a new society and the consciousness that this other society is possible, even though, to be sure, Luxemburg also explains how it does not suffice to only fight for reforms. Contemporary power relations as well as property relations are intertwined and the Left cannot lead struggles based on a conception of capitalism that detaches one from the other.

Q & A

What role do you ascribe to the political as a way to engage history, as a means to learn to understand things in a new way, such that the object of critique is itself changed and thus also our own understanding of this object of critique?

TS: The political does have a dynamic of its own. You would be mistaken, though, to assume that the political process can put everything into a new direction without being embedded in the restraints demanded by politics. I think that the political process contains the unpredictable, the non-deductible, the unexpected and surprising, sudden openings that no one is expecting. The political considerations of the comrades in Cairo only a few months or even a few weeks before the events in Tahrir Square took place within an entirely different horizon than after fall of the Mubarak. Everyone thought the Mubarak regime would last forever, that they would have to essentially adapt to this world dominated by Mubarak, and this was especially true for the left in Egypt. When the events in Tahrir Square unfolded, the Left, which until then still had been marginalized, was suddenly agitating in an entirely different context—this is the momentum of the political and it goes beyond mere "resistance." At the level of the relationship between the micro- and the macro-political, the question arises, "What kind of rupture within your life exists once you decide to remain the political subject after having certain experiences?" If I take a historical look back at my own life I can definitely say that a giant part of my generation has been corrupted.

NT: The Greens, like Die Linke or any other party that tries to change anything by engaging in the political process, face structural constraints. When you take the case of Die Linke joining in on austerity measures when they were in a coalition government in Berlin a few years ago it had to accept the budgetary logic of sustaining only that infrastructure which can also be paid for. This is what happens once you enter into politics. That way, I am already wrapped in all the constraints that define capitalist logic, and all of this is the case in a time in which I have less leeway politically because capital accumulation is faltering. Soon we are left with the so-called "pragmatists" who accept systemic constraints and execute them. That is how a political class emerges which is nothing more than an operative of this logic,

which is to say, of the logic of financial feasibility and the fact that this money necessarily is taken from capitalist accumulation.

JW: Nevertheless, you do need to look at the social configuration of the Greens. They neglected the social question from the beginning. I agree that the Greens in a way are the expression of the demise of a movement, and that they conformed in face of institutional constraints to coalitions, parliaments, and governments by really believing they could change the system. The Greens were able to achieve much more and impact consciousness far more by means of extra-parliamentary activities than what they were able to accomplish during the years they were actually governing. Once the Greens entered into parliament, they accepted constraints, budget consolidations, and the rollback of the welfare state, while appearing politically helpless.

However, there are also important reasons why Die Linke exists as a parliamentary force, since in its absence, the Right would be able to gain all the more at the polls. It would have been interesting to see what would have happened if SYRIZA had become the strongest party in Greece. You cannot explain SYRIZA's success at the polls without taking into consideration the mass movements of the last two years in which there have been 17 general strikes in Greece. It does make a difference whether you can count on mass movements as a government to get through reforms, or whether you can't, and in Greece, SYRIZA could have gone the road of accommodation in a coalition with PASOK. However, they could have also begun to fundamentally question things and dispossess the Greek ruling class, and this could have initiated an entirely new conversation in Europe on the fiscal compact and the so-called "rescue measures."

TS: It was good that SYRIZA did not win the elections! They would likely have not survived a victory because they would have been faced with constraints early on. All leftist forms of politics—the new social movements and the old ones, social democracy, Marxism-Leninism, anarchism—are responsible for some parts of the historical failures of the Left; yet they also have elements that I wouldn't want to forgo. And then there is the possibility that projects such as SYRIZA, which is something else entirely, can emerge. SYRIZA is a new constellation and its platform is of a leftist social democratic nature, in which post-Maoists, post-Trotskyites, anarchists, and upright left social-democrats can participate. This has never existed historically, and it's extraordinary, which is cause for optimism.

Shouldn't we ask, "What is to be done?" rather than argue over whether the Left was dead? Would this not be a way to address such issues more productively? Isn't the end of latitude within capitalism a chance to develop politics independent of it?

NT: Indeed, I think that the term "reform" cannot be applied, for instance, to the governments in Latin America. Chavez's regime does not achieve the political goals it sets for itself, and it is also, as is commonly known, pretty corrupt. What is much more interesting is the space it has opened up for social movements. On the political and institutional level, questions over how to finance things will always come up. Such questions never arise on the level of grassroots politics. There you can say: We don't care how things will be financed. Instead, we just take the houses, the land, the resources and use it according to our needs. And we organize. I wonder what different sorts of latitude are opened up here. Can you still speak of politics in this case? At any rate, you definitely can't talk of reformist politics here—it is something totally new.

JW: Look at the movements in the Arab world, the mass movements in southern Europe, and then look at what's happening in Germany with regard to the crisis. We are immediately faced with the problem that the economically strongest country in the Eurozone has a level of class struggle that is incredibly low. This naturally has something to do with the fact that the strategy to counter the crisis in Germany was entirely different than in southern Europe. Germany did the opposite of what is expected in the south. Here, we went the way of social partnership, which is part of the problem too: In Germany we have the fewest strike days, whereas our unions are the most powerful ones in Europe, and still wages are decreasing. But it should be Germany where protests and resistance against enforced austerity measures and cutbacks are staged. What we are seeing now reminds me of the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s that occurred in the Third World, which, in the end, entirely disempowered people.

What's supposed to have changed so substantially such that there is no more leeway in capitalism, as Norbert claimed? And how have reforms become impossible? Isn't the logic of capital he talks of as old as capitalism is?

NT: If we measure the growth of productivity in material goods, we have seen a four- to six-fold increase in the last 30 years, but under capitalist conditions people have become dispensable en masse. Due to this enormous increase in productivity the dynamic of accumulation, which pushes capitalism forward, has been undermined. That is why we have seen this shift to the financial markets. Capitalism today can only sustain itself by the accumulation of fictitious capital. That is the reason they say, "There is no alternative." Central banks have to pump money into the markets and states jump to the rescue when banks are threatened to collapse because this dynamic of fictitious capital needs to be sustained. And this is what is so dramatic about the changes that have been wrought since the 1960s and '70s.

This dynamic of fictitious capital cannot be sustained forever. Yet every time the Left debates wealth, this debate takes place in the category of money, which is a key point and needs to be debated. Those so-called mandatory spending cuts result solely out of the necessity to sustain the accumulation of (fictitious) capital. However, capitalism increasingly uses up future value in the present to sustain production, and this is precisely

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what has reached its limits. This is what presents itself symptomatically as the necessity to cut spending. Now is the historical moment in which we need to broach the issue of the kind of wealth we want.

TS: Whether reformism is possible now or not cannot be derived out of any analysis of the momentum of capital, no matter how refined it is, since the fact that reformism was possible in the 20th century was essentially the result of the October Revolution. Capital always resisted concessions, but the October Revolution terrified the bourgeoisie so much that they were suddenly willing to make concessions after all.

What I would expect from a reformist project in the 21st century is that it would have to brace itself for the permanence of an autonomous contradiction from society and accept it as such. This would be a reinvention; it would be a project that tries to acknowledge the autonomy of the street and the autonomous self-organization of people even in moments of conflict. For that you need a solidary communication of people from both camps—the moderate and the radical left. Never before was the dialogue between these camps led in such an open, multifaceted and solidary manner, and on such a long-term scale, as is the case today. There are radically left organizations, such as the *Interventionistische Linke*, who still work on the problem of how to establish the autonomy of all, and if we succeed in establishing dialogue on a long-term basis, then we have a model for such a reformist project.

What this can achieve, however, will depend on whether people will revolt, just as the October Revolution was such a revolt, and opened up the possibility to spread—as it did, as a matter of fact—despite repeatedly failing. The October Revolution inspired anticolonial movements that ultimately led to the collapse of colonialism. This was the essential reason why we had reforms in Central Europe. This presents an option for us to pursue. Otherwise I'd suggest we just retire for a while and think—for example, by reading Adorno.

How important is Adorno's critique of the '68 generation's understanding of resistance and of their actionism? Is it perhaps more topical today than it was in 1968?

DL: This conflict took place in a situation in which all were partly wrong. On the one side you had students protesting at lectures and erring fundamentally in their assessment of Adorno and of the actions they took against the Institute for Social Research. It sucked just as much, though, that Adorno called the police. We can learn something of the relationship between intellectuals and social movements: Both need to be part of a social transformation. For that you need space and time to think, and this is what Adorno was doing in the face of the pressures of the street. But of course he was wrong in his assessment of this movement.

However, I do think the accusation of pseudo-activity is wrong. What's the prefix "pseudo—" supposed to mean? You can explain it by a conception of society as a dominating totality, so that nothing short of its complete abolition can be counted as "real" activism. Such a conception is wrong, and this is where Adorno erred. You have to give him credit, though, in that he himself never complied with this verdict. Adorno did involve himself in politics. Not only did he give lectures and write texts, but he also intervened just as much in practical politics, such as in his stances on pedagogy. This is a specific kind of politics, namely a reformist one. This is what Adorno pursued, while opposing an activist kind of politics. He did so for various reasons we can debate. We could ask whether he assessed the situation adequately; he said the time for this sort of activist politics was over and that we needed a different kind of politics. Here, too, I disagree with him. Nevertheless, Adorno had some important criticisms that I think are still valid. But the term "pseudo-activity" is unwarranted, and it's not helpful for today's struggles.

TS: Although I appreciate Adorno, I thought his criticism of the student movement was mistaken then, and still is. He was incapable of accepting what was happening in front of his own eyes. On the subject of pseudo-activism: This aspect is the most important one when you evaluate the question of how to become a political subject! If things are the way they are, you need to take the right to hold off, instead of getting lost in pseudo-activism. My background is in the non-dogmatic, post-Leninist, half-Maoist left of the 1970s, and from a certain point onward I was surrounded by Greens and Autonomists. I allowed myself to withdraw from those discussions and to think, because I thought that which was being offered did not resonate with me for various reasons. However, when, in the early 1990s, neo-Nazis set fires to several buildings that housed asylum seekers, it became clear to me that I had spent enough time thinking and I needed to be active again. Thus, there are times of pseudo-activism, and it's part of being seriously political that one avoids simply becoming entangled in activism. Yet, if you back out completely, you stop being a political subject.

JW: What's important is not whether we have arguments on the Left, but whether a concerted effort or praxis emanates out of such an argument, for it makes little sense to argue unproductively over things if we cannot reunite in the end. This is where we need to ask, "What is it that we can actually agree on now, and what is the task for the Left today?" IP

Transcribed by Gregor Baszak, Markus Niedobitek, Nicolas Schlessler, Jerzy Sobotta. Translated by Gregor Baszak.

1. See *Platypus Review* 4 (April 2008) and *Platypus Review* 53 (February 2013).

The anti-political party, continued from page 2

Loach to fight against the Labour Party in the elections. Just as they had handed over political leadership to the Labour left in the 1980s, so too did they let the old Labour MP Galloway draw up the platform for Respect. There were two main platforms: the first was anti-war,

of the International Socialists relates to the contemporary mood, but appealing to people on the basis of their contempt for politics, in the end, is bound to demoralize them, so that the rate of attrition among the members leaves the party running to stand still. IP



Stop the War protest in London, February, 2003.

and for a domestic social program, RESPECT offered a revived platform of social welfare and nationalization drawn from the Labour manifestos of 1945 and 1983. RESPECT could rally disaffected Labour voters, and Galloway worked younger Muslims who were put off by the Iraq war. But it was not a stable coalition, and in Galloway, the SWP had created a monster whose ego could not be contained. Opportunistically, Lindsey German offered to downplay the SWP's policies on women's oppression, especially if these were going to jeopardize Galloway and Muslim voters. Still, Galloway refused to be a puppet of the SWP. The coalition split, with an exposed SWP obliged to stand its own "left list" to save face—but getting a desultory vote.

What Cliff and the leadership of the organization that followed him could not understand was that they were not really seeing signs of an upturn, but following the symptoms of popular disaffection with politics. Often misunderstanding these symptoms of depoliticization and decay as positive features of a "new mood," the SWP could live off the growing disaffection, but at a high cost. Each successive attempt to kick the party into gear with yet another mobilization would lead to demoralization, and increasingly to factions and splits. These factions would usually claim to be trying to go back to the roots of the International Socialists before it all went wrong—though they never could work out where it was that had gone wrong. What Birchall's book documents is that it is the IS tradition itself that is flawed; the current leadership has merely adapted to this flawed inheritance rather than questioning it. The anti-political bias

1. Tony Cliff, *A World to Win* (London: Bookmarks, 2000), 111, 124.

2. See for example Alex Callinicos, "Is Leninism Finished?", *Socialist Review*, January 2013.

3. Borrowed from TN Vance in Michael Kidron, "Two Insights don't make a Theory," *International Socialism*, Series 1, No. 100 (July 1977), <www.marxists.org/archive/kidron/works/1977/07/insights.htm>.

4. See Alex Callinicos, "Imperialism and the Global Economy," *International Socialism Journal*, 108 (October, 2005), <www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=140>.

5. Alex Callinicos, "Politics or Abstract Propagandism," *International Socialism Journal* Series 2, No. 11 (Winter 1981): 122.

6. See also Cosmo Landesmann, *Starstruck* (London: Macmillan, 2008), 99–100.

7. Martin Shaw, "The Making of A Party," *Socialist Register* 15 (1978): 123.

8. Michael Kidron, "For Every Prince There is a Princess," *IS Internal Bulletin* (March 1973), <www.marxists.org/archive/kidron/works/1973/03/yaffe.htm>.

9. See Alex Callinicos, "Politics or Abstract Propagandism," *International Socialism Series 2*, 11 (Winter, 1981). Ian Birchall seconded the motion to expel Yaffe and his followers.

10. See also Bob Cant, "A Grim Tale The I.S. Gay Group 1972–75," *Gay Left*, No. 3 (Autumn, 1976).

11. Even then the leaflet they put out made an issue out of Powell's writing Greek Verse, as if to say that really he was upper class and probably a homosexual.

12. Cliff, *A World to Win*, 193.

Fifth Annual International Convention of the Platypus Affiliated Society

5-7 April 2013

The School of the Art Institute
Chicago, IL, USA

UTOPIA AND PROGRAM

What possibilities remain for a Left whose goal is no longer utopian, and whose path is no longer programmatically defined?

convention2013.platypus1917.org

"Program" and "utopia" have for well over a century now sat in uneasy tension within the politics of the Left, in tension both with each other and with themselves. Political programs tend to be presented in the sober light of practicability—straightforward, realistic, matter-of-fact. Social utopias, by contrast, appear quite oppositely as the virtue of aspiring ambition—involved, unrealistic, exhilarating. Historically, then, the two would appear to be antithetical. In either case, one usually offers itself up as a corrective to the other: the programmatic as a harsh "reality check" to pipe-dream idealism; utopianism as an alternative to dreary, cynical Realpolitik.

Today, however, it is unavoidable that both program and utopia are in profound crisis. For those Leftists who still hold out some hope for the possibility of extra-electoral politics, an impasse has arisen. Despite the effusive political outbursts of 2011-12 in the Arab Spring and #Occupy—with their emphasis on the identity of means

and ends, anti-hierarchical modes of organization, and utopian prefiguration—the Left still seems to have run aground. Traces may remain in the form of various issue-based affinity groups, but the more ambitious projects of achieving sweeping social transformation have been quietly put to rest, consoled with the mere memory of possibility.

Meanwhile, longstanding Left organizations, having temporarily reverted to the usual waiting game of patiently tailoring popular discontents with the status quo until the masses finally come around and decide to "get with the program" (i.e., their program), have experienced a crisis of their own: Slowly disintegrating, with occasional spectacular implosions, many of their dedicated cadre call it quits amid demoralization and recriminations. What possibilities might remain for a Left whose goal is no longer utopian, and whose path is no longer programmatically defined?

FRIDAY, APRIL 5

1:00pm: Registration (112 S. Michigan Avenue, 1st Floor, Lobby)

2:00pm – 3:30pm: Different Perspectives on the Left

- 1. Internationalist Perspective (US) - Alan Milchman (Room TBD)
- 2. Green Party (US) - Jack Ailey (Room TBD)
- 3. New Compass and Demokratisk Alternativ (Norway) - Erik Eglad (Room TBD)

3:40pm – 5:10pm: Different Perspectives on the Left

- 1. Québec solidaire (Canada) - Roger Rashi (Room TBD)
- 2. Party for Socialism and Liberation (US) - John Beacham (Room TBD)
- 3. EXIT (Germany) - Elmar Flatschart (Room TBD)

Opening Plenary

6:00pm – 8:00pm: *The Left in Power?* (36 S. Wabash Avenue, 1st Floor)

- Erik Eglad (New Compass)
- Andreas Karitzis (SYRIZA)
- James Turley (Communist Party of Great Britain)

SATURDAY, APRIL 6

9:00am: Registration (112 S. Michigan Avenue, 1st Floor, Lobby)

10:00am – 11:30am: Different Perspectives on the Left (112 S. Michigan Avenue)

- 1. SYRIZA (Greece) - Andreas Karitzis (Room 908)
- 2. International Marxist-Humanist Organization (US) - Peter Hudis and Marilyn Nissim-Sabat (Room 919)
- 3. Endnotes (US/UK) (Room 920)

11:40am – 1:10pm: Different Perspectives on the Left (112 S. Michigan Avenue)

- 1. Revolutionary Communist Party (US) (Room 908)
- 2. International Marxist Tendency (Canada) - Noah Gataveckas (Room 919)
- 3. Solidarity Halifax (Canada) - David Bush and Lesley Thompson (Room 920)

Panels

2:30pm – 4:00pm: What is Imperialism? (What Now?) (112 S. Michigan Avenue, Room 908)

- Larry Everest (Revolutionary Communist Party)
- Joseph Green (Communist Voice)
- James Turley (Communist Party of Great Britain)

2:30pm – 4:00pm: The Labor Left After Politics and After Utopia (112 S. Michigan Avenue, Room 920)

- Steven Ashby (University of Illinois at Chicago)
- Sam Gindin (Socialist Project)
- Andreas Karitzis (SYRIZA)

4:15pm – 5:45pm: Capital, History and Environmental Politics (112 S. Michigan Avenue, Room 908)

- Erik Eglad (New Compass)
- Joseph Green (Communist Voice)
- Roger Rashi (Québec solidaire)

4:15pm – 5:45pm: Marx and "Wertkritik" (112 S. Michigan Avenue, Room 908)

- Elmar Flatschart (EXIT)
- Jamie Merchant (Permanent Crisis)
- Alan Milchman (Internationalist Perspective)

Closing Plenary

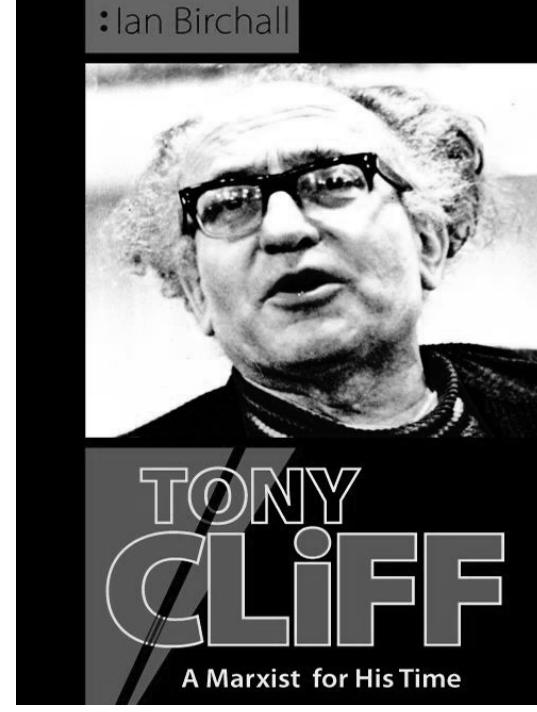
6:00pm – 8:00pm: Program and Utopia (112 S. Michigan Avenue, 1st Floor, Ballroom)

- Endnotes
- Stephen Eric Bronner (Rutgers University)
- Sam Gindin (Socialist Project)
- Roger Rashi (Québec solidaire)
- Richard Rubin (Platypus Affiliated Society)

The anti-political party

Book Review: Ian Birchall. *Tony Cliff: A Marxist for His Time*. London: Bookmarks, 2011.

James Heartfield



THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY (SWP) is the largest political party left of the Labour Party, and has been active on the far left since 1977 and before that as the International Socialists since the 1960s. The party was led by Tony Cliff until his death thirteen years ago, and Ian Birchall, who has written this diligently researched memoir, is still a member since joining in the 1960s. Birchall's "warts-and-all" examination is motivated by a marked unhappiness about *A World To Win*, the autobiography which Cliff apparently wrote based on recollection, without access to the relevant documentation. Cliff, Birchall remarks, was sometimes abrasive and "often underestimated the contributions of other comrades" (ix, 543). However, whatever its deficiencies, *A World to Win* narrates the story of the SWP pretty much as it appeared to Cliff, as one that was inseparable from his own life story. And as Cliff made clear, "there was no time in which militant workers were so open to us as in 1970-74," under the Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, "not before and not since."¹ Yet if we take this claim seriously, no organization better embodies the failure of the British workers to take power than the Socialist Workers Party, which has endured for more than half a century, though not for the reasons that its leaders think.² Indeed, it might be argued that Cliff's real achievement was to found a movement that rode a wave of disaffection from mainstream politics, unburdened by too many dogmatic ideas.

Birchall recounts that Tony Cliff joined the small Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist League in Palestine before coming to Britain after the Second World War. The movement he joined faced some big problems. First, like all far left groups, it was guilty by its association with the repressive dictatorship that Stalin had built in the USSR. Second, the Trotskyists were saddled with an analysis that the economic crisis would get much worse after the Second World War (the destruction of the war had laid the basis for a revival). Third, globally, the working classes were divided between the peoples of the developing world, who were denied their freedom by military imperialism, and those of the developed world, who tended to support reforms offered by the state.

It was in this context that Cliff started to develop new theories to explain the new conditions in which the Left found itself, along with his early collaborators Mike Kidron and later Nigel Harris. He broke with orthodox Trotskyism to argue that the Soviet Union was not socialist, but actually capitalist, "state capitalist," only masquerading as socialist (anti-Stalinists like Max Schachtman and Raya Dunayevskaya drew similar conclusions, and later some Maoists argued the point). He also countered the prevailing claims of the Marxist left that the 1960s would be years of crisis, arguing that government spending on arms would boost the economy, what Cliff referred to as the "permanent arms economy." Lastly, against British comrades who believed in the importance of Lenin's argument about imperialism, Cliff held that it was not the highest stage beyond which capitalism could develop, but the "highest stage but one." Together, Cliff thought of the theories of "state capitalism," the "permanent arms economy," and the end of imperialism as a "troika" of intellectual achievements.

Although Birchall does not acknowledge it, these were not really theories so much as an intellectual spinning of the facts, worked up to avoid specific problems. It was wise to say that the International Socialists did not want to make Britain into the Soviet Union, but bizarre to say that what was wrong with Stalinism was that it was capitalist, as if "capitalist" were a word that you applied to anything that you did not like. For as Kidron went on admit, the "state capitalist" "analysis was never a general theory," and the "permanent arms economy" was a piece of Keynesian thinking.³ These "theories" saddled the group with false prognoses that had to be reversed later on. The spending on arms, which was credited with preserving capitalism, was later credited with precipitating a new crisis. And while the International Socialists thought that Lenin's theory of imperialism was superseded in the 1960s (just as the conflicts in Algeria, Vietnam, Northern Ireland, South Africa and elsewhere were mounting) the SWP later embraced the struggle against imperialism in 2003 when it rallied to support for what the party called "the resistance" in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴

None of this "theorization" was all that important to the growth of the International Socialists. But it shows that, from the outset, a convenient indifference to dogmatism sat well with the organization's pointedly anti-intellectual approach. What Birchall's portrayal inad-

vertently illustrates is that rather than working through the difficult history of the Left, Cliff's approach was to travel light, jettisoning theories that did not seem to fit, making up new ones to fill the gaps. While the classical Marxist tradition held that the key question of socialist organization was class consciousness, Cliff dismissed it, thinking that most workers were already socialists and that their bigger problem was *class confidence* (282). It is in this vein that Alex Callinicos, who inherited the mantle of chief theorist of the SWP, has argued it does not matter too much if workers "have reactionary ideas on questions such as race, the position of women and so on"—the key thing was that they build their confidence through struggle.⁵

Birchall owns up to a philistine side to Cliff's Party: "On occasion in the SWP there had been currents of workerism and anti-intellectualism, and Cliff himself had sometimes been guilty of encouraging them," (546)—but even that is to talk down the failing. Birchall documents that Cliff often told students, "Don't waste your time reading books!" And that even Callinicos was told not to bother pursuing a doctorate on Marx's *Capital* because Cliff had already settled issues of its interpretation (344). Cliff's anti-intellectualism was not so strange in the 1960s, when hippies painted Blake's saying, "The Tigers of Wrath are Wiser than the Horses of Instruction," on the walls of Notting Hill, and Jay Landesmann recommended the "university of life" above college brain-washing. While Landesmann boasted that his children got "the worst education money could buy," Birchall reveals that Cliff offered his daughter Anna £5 for every exam she failed (390).⁶

With its emphasis on activism, an iconoclastic view of received opinion, and an emphasis on change from the bottom up, the International Socialists caught the mood of the 1960s student revolt. Cliff's group recruited impressive young comrades in Paul Foot and Gus MacDonald in Glasgow, the polymath Peter Sedgwick and the brothers Christopher and Peter Hitchens at Oxford University, the Women's Liberationists Irene Bruegel and Sheila Rowbotham, Eamon McCann of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, and the sociologists Laurie Taylor and Jock Young.

In the early 1960s, when they were known as the Socialist Review Group, the International Socialists worked as "entryists" inside the Labour Party, lifted by the mood that ended the wasted years of Tory rule and swept Harold Wilson's modernising Labour Party into power. The grubbier compromises of Wilson's non-ideological, managerial approach disappointed the idealism of those who had voted him in and the International Socialists drifted out of the Labour Party alongside them. While Wilson and his minister Barbara Castle were proposing an official incomes policy, Cliff caught the militant trade unionists' mood with a small, well-selling book, *Incomes Policy, Legislation and the Shop Stewards* (1966). Cliff's one tenacious view was that the International Socialists would stick close to whatever action there was and not let any dogma get in the way; unless they recruited a core of activists, he intuited, they would have no influence. Tellingly, the group ignored its own theoretical view that anti-imperialist struggles were irrelevant and threw itself into the militant student protests against the Vietnam War.

Cliff sought to tighten up the IS group, which was hitherto quite loosely cobbled, through talks and actions, a bit like an anarchist group. He had once set out Rosa Luxemburg's arguments in favor of working class spontaneity and the "mass strike" as the way to achieve power. But then he altered course, arguing for a "Leninist" party of "democratic centralism," pressing the need for discipline in the IS. Birchall takes this intellectual turn seriously, although, to my mind, Lenin's name was invoked more as an incantation than with any real understanding. For, despite what Birchall assumes, it is debatable whether Luxemburg and Lenin held opposite opinions on the issue of party discipline. But the main innovation was that the new group would follow orders. Ted Crawford remembers that the leadership were trying to "hurry things up" and had adopted an attitude of "not in front of the children" (358). Cliff, Kidron, Chris Harman, and Callinicos thought that the discussion of Marxist theory in the party's branches and discussion bulletins would put workers off the party.⁷ They were particularly irritated when David Yaffe and others used Marx's theory of crisis to show that the state expenditure-led post-war growth had reached its limits. Kidron referred to this as an instance of "Talmudic" reasoning and he stuck to his Keynesian argument that arms spending would offset the recession.⁸ The critics who held that the party needed a better understanding of Labour's grip on the working class were denounced as "paleo-Marxists" and "Abstract Propagandists" and expelled, an episode that Birchall prefers to forget.⁹ The lesson seemed to be that socialism had to be dumbed down to appeal to workers.

The International Socialists' investment in student protests of the 1960s was thus followed by an involvement in the explosion of working class militancy in the seventies. Alive to the need to challenge the Communist Party's influence among trade union activists, especially shop stewards, Cliff's student recruits sold the IS newspaper outside factories in order to meet workers. He held that the explosion of protest in France was the result of the "years of depoliticization" and "the deep alienation of workers from traditional organizations" like the official trade union movement and the socialist and communist parties (306). The International Socialists thus challenged the mainstream left for influence just as rank and file militancy was on the rise and thereby transformed itself into a party.

Hacking through the detail, Birchall does not make the point that between 1968 and 1974 the European working class was as close to power as it had been since 1919-23. Industrial militancy went off the chart. In Britain a panic-stricken ruling class attacked militants, sending them to prison (as with the building workers known as the Pentonville Five and then the Shrewsbury Two), drawing up ration books, putting rebellious industry onto a "three day week," waging clandestine guerrilla warfare in Italy and Belgium; in Northern Ireland the troops were sent in as an army of occupation, setting up internment camps to suppress the rebellious civil rights protestors. There was no absence of working class *confidence* as voters backed the striking miners when Prime Minister Heath went to the country on the question of who governs. The failure of the revolution in Britain, though, was pointed. While the ruling class was preparing a clampdown, the working class teetered on the brink of challenging them, and then fell back, uncertain what to do.

The Socialist Workers Party called for more strikes and more solidarity, but when an election was called, it lobbied workers to vote for Labour! When, in 1972, the question of state power was put most starkly in Northern Ireland, the *Socialist Worker* supported the intervention of British troops.

As is well known, the round of strikes went on, but at a high cost. In 1975 a conference document sounded a note of caution: "we overestimated the speed with which the economic crisis would drive workers to draw revolutionary political conclusions" (376), but of course there was no reason that workers would draw revolutionary conclusions if no political movement was making that case. The SWP's apolitical militancy just left all the political decisions in the hands of the Labour Party, who were waiting in the wings to take over when Heath's government lost control. Labour's plan to halt the crisis was a "Social Contract"—a government-brokered restraint on pay. Cliff drew up a new pamphlet, "Crisis:

little more than divisive ideas, and could not understand the connection between nationally based reformism and the denial of rights to blacks. Racism, they thought, would fall away when workers united in struggle. When police's targeting of black youngsters provoked riots in Brixton in 1981, *Socialist Worker* insisted that the rioting had nothing to do with race, but rather a united black and white protest against unemployment.

Where they did feel comfortable talking about race was in the movement against the far-right National Front (NF). The SWP attempted to connect the anti-racist struggle against the NF with the popular anti-fascist mobilization against Germany in the Second World War. Racism was reduced to a question of fascists who were outside the realm of respectable opinion that the Anti-Nazi League would defend. It was a campaign that footballers and bishops could support because it cast the race problem as one of extremists who were alien to British society.

In the eighties, the SWP survived by amplifying the "anti-Thatcher mood," joining protests and such strikes that were provoked by the employer's offensive. "There is real hatred for this Tory government," Cliff intuited, but "this hatred is accompanied by a very widespread impotence" (451). When left-wingers tried to take control of the Labour Party, putting up Tony Benn for deputy leader, Cliff was skeptical not of the revival of state socialist policies but that this resolution-mongering would be a distraction from building in the workplace. Birchall tells the story as if the SWP had savagely criticized the Benn campaign, but at the time the headline of *Socialist Worker* was "Benn for Deputy." An entente or division of labor emerged where Benn and the other Labour Party leftists would outline the socialist policy at the podium (mostly about state control of industry), but the willing foot-soldiers of the SWP would prove their worth by organizing the grassroots support, whether gathering canvassers in elections or helping organize demonstrations and building support for strikes.



After the arrest of five shop stewards (the "Pentonville Five") who disobeyed a court order to cease picketing, a series of strikes and protests swept Britain, culminating in the Trades Union Congress's call for a general strike in July, 1972.

Social Contract or Socialism" (1975), but what it had to offer working class militants was more strife, but no way out, concluding:

We are entering a long period of instability. International capitalism will be rent by economic, social and political crises. Big class battles are ahead of us. Their outcome will decide the future of humanity for a long time to come. (375)

Some of those who were tasked with building the new factory branches of the party in the early seventies, like Jim Higgins and Roger Rosewell, were burned out, and complained that the perspective was unrealistic. Birchall sums up the party's failure by blaming the other side:

The hopes of the IS in the early 1970s were not realised because the Labour government succeeded in enforcing its Social Contract and large-scale industrial conflict virtually came to an end... reformism proved rather more resilient than had been expected. (405)

That, of course, was precisely where the SWP had failed. It never sought to challenge the Labour Party for *political leadership* amongst the working class, choosing instead to build influence through trade union militancy.

Struggling to explain the setback, Cliff developed what was called the theory of the "downturn," which was no theory as such. It was just an empirical statement of the decline in strike activity. Cliff's view of the working class was essentially sociological. They were defined by their relation to the means of production and they were more or less confident. Workers were organized in trade unions committed to the state socialist policies of the Labour Party. Reformist socialism was the ideal around which the working class had formed itself. When that ideal proved to be a failure, the working class did not "draw revolutionary conclusions" because there had been no political struggle for such conclusions. Instead, the organized working class took the failures of socialism personally. Some were angry; many more were defensive, or altogether demoralized. Cliff's theory of the "downturn" only reflected the appearance of falling militancy, but left out the decisive factor, the absence of an alternative to Labour that might have become a focus for renewed struggle.

The party's philistine outlook on questions of race and sex equality was at its strongest in the mid-1970s when there was a concerted push to win working class support. All social questions were reducible to the relation of exploitation of the working class "at the point of production." The political realm was discounted as unimportant, and the struggle for rights illusory. Women's liberation was treated as a secondary question, and the student milieu self-consciously adopted what they took to be working class attitudes towards women. The International Socialists' out-and-out hostility to gay rights went so far that a gay caucus organized by Don Milligan and Bob Cant was broken up (424, 440).¹⁰

So, too, did the organization struggle to understand the race question. The International Socialists had challenged racism among dockworkers in an infamous walkout in favor of the anti-immigrant cabinet minister Enoch Powell.¹¹ Still the group thought of racism as

The party's defensiveness was writ large when Yorkshire miners struck over a program of pit closures. The weakness of the strike was the division between the militant miners and the rest. Leftist hero of the 1974 strike Arthur Scargill had been elected president of the union and was close to the militants, but feared that a national ballot would have been beaten. It was the militants' weakness that they sought to sidestep the rest of the membership by avoiding a ballot and instead picketing out the pits in support of those threatened with closure. From the outset "the strike was not solid," and many miners saw the lack of a ballot as a justification to work on.¹² Instead of challenging the evasion of the activists around Scargill and calling for an all-out campaign to win a national ballot, Cliff made a virtue of the strike's weakest point, and *Socialist Worker* denounced rank and file democracy as "ballot-it's" and a concession to Thatcherism. The ballot was not held; the miners stayed divided and lost. Yet more problematic was Scargill's nationalistic "Plan for Coal," which claimed that coal was profitable for British industry, as if miners' interests coincided with capitalist success—the SWP simply ignored the meaning of the Plan for Coal. Birchall makes the interesting point that Paul Foot talked strategy on the phone to Scargill throughout the strike (485). Later Cliff dishonestly tried to shift the blame onto the miners' leader for the strike's failure, much to Foot's dismay, when every step Scargill took had been supported by the SWP. With the miners' defeat, the "downturn" became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Blaming the working class was always easier than trying to understand that it was the Left that had failed.

The SWP seemed set to fall into decline alongside the rest of the Left. On the other hand, the other rivals were falling by the wayside: the Communist Party was irreparably wounded by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Workers Revolutionary Party run into the ground by its hysterical leader until a bankrupt leadership overthrew him by uncovering a sex-scandal; the Militant Tendency had been expelled from the Labour Party. In a very small pond, the SWP was the larger fish.

In the last decade of his life, Cliff read the runes of the class struggle, detecting a "new mood" (504). Waiting for the upturn would become the party's business, and successive events were singled out as the turning point: the middle England protests against the closing of the last mines, the anti-capitalist protests in Seattle, or most recently the expected fight back against Tory cuts. At times popular disaffection would even lead to great carnivals of protest, like the anti-poll tax campaign that culminated in rioting in Trafalgar Square in 1990. In 2003, protests against the Iraq War grew massively as they too became a focus for popular disaffection with the political establishment led by Tony Blair in Britain, who led Labour's return to office after a 17-year hiatus. The SWP threw itself into those protests, seeing them as a return to mass opposition, but it did not understand that, despite appearances, the dominant sentiment was an anti-political mood of disengagement—pithily captured by the inward-looking slogan "not in my name."

On the back of the Gulf War protests, the SWP took its most ambitious move yet, founding the RESPECT coalition with George Galloway, Salma Yaqob and Ken