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## *Opium of the people?*

**PROTESTS  
AGAINST FEES  
& CUTS**

**ISLAM &  
ISLAMOPHOBIA**

**BUDDHISM &  
ACTIVISM**



January '11 - May '11

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# editorial

The past few months have seen an ever increasing stream of protests and events, of political analysis and of new groups being formed. These moments seem to be increasing in both intensity and occurrence and have made it such that a lack of coherent understanding of the 'the cuts', the protests that they have sparked and the responses that they have been met with, is understandable both in this editorial and amongst all of us. As we take a step back to reflect both on the past year's historic attacks on welfare provisions and jobs, and the rise of popular protest against the new Con/Dem government, we are left mostly with questions and a feeling of, 'what happened/is happening' and 'where are we going next'?

Shift is a project that aims to provide a platform for, and intervene in, movement debates. When we met several months ago, before Millbank brought a different set of political issues into focus, to talk about the theme for this issue we felt that the rise of the EDL and the uncritical nature of many Left/Islamic partnerships indicated that religion is an important issue to be discussed.

Religion has been and still is an important component of many political movements, including our own. The Muslim Association of Britain's membership of the Stop the War coalition and the partnership between Respect and various hardline Muslim and Hindu groups are only the most obvious examples. From solidarity campaigners involved in organising around the Israel-Palestine conflict to the Tamil protests that brought Parliament Square to a halt, the presence of Quakers and Buddhists in peace campaigns, or the Christian café and 'Islamic perspectives' workshop at Climate Camp, religion is a presence within our movements and the wider world we seek to engage with. Religion, and Islam in particular, is also becoming central to emerging forms of far right politics. As the anarchist writers, Phil Dickens and Paul Stott explore in this issue, we must reject both fanatical Islam and fanatical Islamophobia. As Alberto Toscano discusses in our interview with him, the political mobilisation of religious movements is rarely ever progressive. Even those religious movements which seek to resist capital and power, such as the European Millenarian peasant revolts of the 1500s, can be conservative in their aims.

So whilst crisis and instability can bring with it a stronger longing for transcendental authority, our criticism of religious influences within radical movements both right and left must be part and parcel of the critique of capital and authority, where we understand the function of religion in capitalist society as one of veiling material social relations and turning social domination into an issue of morality alone. We believe this understanding can also guide us in our response to the cuts, where we must situate our response to these 'reforms' an expression of anti-capitalist struggle, rather than a protectionist, nostalgic or moralistic clinging to a defunct welfare state and democratic process. Indeed, recent nostalgia for the energy and dissent of the poll tax riots is perhaps a dangerous and false comparison to fall back on, one that ultimately shows a lack of ambition in collectively imagining the possibilities that ruptures such as those felt under Thatcher, and now again under the coalition, can open up.

This is the message delivered in our final two articles. In their respective analyses of the emerging anti-cuts movement, Werner Bonefeld, Keir Milburn and Bertie Russell argue forcefully that a politics based on an 'anti-cuts' position can never do anything more than defend the present. And why would we be interested in defending that present, replete as it is with wage labour, environmental destruction and instrumental education systems? The alternative they present is to move towards a politics that seeks to not only dare to reimagine, but also to control, the future.

Indeed, the future hasn't felt nearly as exciting, or nearly as daunting, in a long time. We hope the articles contained in this issue can help spark the vital discussions needed for moving into that future.



# fascism, fundamentalism, and the left

Since the May General Election, we have been witnessing the slow demise of British fascism as we know it. The British National Party's spectacular failure tore open divisions and animosities that had been long brewing below the surface. Resignations, sackings, splits, and general disorder have turned the party in on itself. At the same time, the new government's austerity measures and the fight back they have provoked has pushed racial politics to the sidelines, as people once more awaken to the realities of class war.

And yet, the English Defence League continues to grow. Part of this is down to the unique position it finds itself in. Not being a political party, it cannot suffer a decline in electoral fortune. Not being a social movement, they needn't worry about grassroots organising. All they have to do is call demonstrations, and people will come. They offer an outlet for neo-Nazis, football hooligans, loyalists, and others just looking for a fight and a flash point, and as long as that is the limit of their ambitions they remain immune to the political factors which brought down the BNP.

The other side of the EDL's success is down to political Islam.

I was tempted to say the "rise" of political Islam, but that wouldn't be strictly true. Being an extreme minority position whose ideals are alien to most people on this island, it has no base with which to build a broad-based movement for political reform, nor to galvanise the populace into revolution. It will remain the preserve of a tiny band of lunatics espousing abhorrent views, and all that will change is how much attention they are given.

## Cross-radicalisation

Unfortunately, at the moment, the answer to that is "a lot." With stunts such as burning poppies on Armistice Day, and threatening to march through Wootton Bassett, groups such as Islam4UK and Muslims Against Crusades can stir up more than enough public outrage to make themselves seem important. The government's use of the SAS to protect shopping centres, and the continual playing up of the terror threat, likewise adds fear to that outrage.

And this feeds the atmosphere and sentiments that keep the EDL going.

Despite what it says, the EDL does not exist merely to "peacefully protest against militant Islam." Chants such as "we hate Pakis more than you" and stunts like throwing pigs' heads at mosques tell of overt racism and deliberate provocation. At its demos, supporters who break police lines regularly invade and attack Asian communities. For the EDL, the distinction between ordinary Muslims and militant Islamists does not exist.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the message of clerics such as Anjem Choudary played a part in their rapid expansion. Founder Stephen Lennon has spoken before of how "preachers of hate such as Anjem Choudary have been recruiting for radical Islamist groups in Luton for years" whilst "our government does nothing." This led to him and others deciding to "start protesting against radical Islam, and it grew from there."

But this isn't just a one-way process. It has



been noted on more than one occasion that the EDL attacking Muslims provides "constituent parts" for those who would radicalise vulnerable people to encourage them to "go through the gateway towards being radicalised."

The role of class is not insignificant in this process. Fascism grows by feeding off anger and feelings of marginalisation amongst the working class, and offering a solution that turns one section of the working class against another. Islamism is no different. The only difference is that one ideology is appealing to the white working class with patriotic and nationalist sentiments, whilst the other is appealing to the Muslim working class with religious sentiments. The antagonism between the two strands actually helps to form a symbiotic relationship. The two opposing ideologies feed off one another.

## The failures of the left

Unfortunately, the anti-fascist movement has failed to recognise the implications of this. In particular, groups such as Unite

Against Fascism have adopted a very black-and-white approach to this issue which has played into the EDL's view that all those who oppose them are "in bed with radical Islam." It has also resulted in accusations of "Islamophobia" being hurled about in a way that made the entire movement look ridiculous.

For example, back in June the EDL announced plans to march on Tower Hamlets in opposition against what UAF called "a peace conference, organised by a Muslim charitable foundation and aimed at building understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims." It emerged that this was in fact an event being organised by the Islamic Forum of Europe, "a virulent form of political Islam that is fascistic in nature like Jaamat Islam and verges on the anti-Semitic and is very exclusivist and undemocratic."

That description comes from a statement issued by a number of local groups, including Muslim and Bangladeshi organisations, in opposition to the EDL's "demonstration." However, in taking such a

position – "against fascism in all its colours" – the groups behind the statement were accused of being racist and in league with fascists.

Such an attitude will be familiar to anybody who has dealt for long enough with UAF and the Socialist Workers' Party for whom they operate as a front group. Five years ago, human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell criticised UAF for inviting Sir Iqbal Sacranie, then head of the Muslim Council of Britain, to speak at one of its events. He dubbed it "a sad betrayal of liberal, non-homophobic Muslims," saying that "Sir Iqbal's homophobic views, and the MCB's opposition to gay equality, echo the prejudice and discrimination of the BNP." For these comments, he was accused of "claim[ing] the role of liberator and expert about Muslim gays and lesbians" and of being "part of the Islamophobia industry." Clearly, absurdity knows no bounds.

The problem is that those afflicted by such a narrow perspective are currently the most influential in the broader anti-fascist movement. UAF is able to draw in the sup-



port of students and young people on the sole basis of vague, anti-racist politics, whilst keeping class analysis out of the worldview keeps funding from mainstream organisations coming in. Thus, they are able to simply marginalise and ignore tricky debates such as this when it suits them.

Hope not Hate have, especially of late, shown a lot more political savvy in this regard. They recognise that “hate breeds hate,” and that “the EDL breeds Islamic extremism and Islamic extremism breeds the EDL.” This is certainly a better position than UAF’s. However, ever the statist, they delegate responsibility for “mak[ing] a stand against extremism on both sides of the divide” to “the Government.”

They, too, ignore class issues and reduce the matter to one of “extremism.” In essence, that those who diverge too far from the narrow spectrum of mainstream politics must be taken care of by the state.

The problem with this, as the left should be all too aware, is that under such auspices the definition on “extremism” goes beyond violent fascists and religious lunatics espousing holy war. Forward Intelligence Teams and police “evidence gatherers” are becoming ever more commonplace on demonstrations of all kinds, particularly those in opposition to the cuts. Their job is to gather footage of “domestic extremists” – that is, those who take to the streets to protest, picket, and make their voices heard.

By this definition, trade unionists, environmentalists, anti-war activists, and anti-fascists are extremists as much as the EDL and Muslims Against Crusades. As such, asking the government to “make a stand against extremism” sets a very dangerous precedent indeed.

## Militant working class self-defence

Even if the English Defence League wasn’t a fascist organisation grounded in loyalty and hooliganism, it wouldn’t be an effective vehicle to challenge political Islam. It is a purely reactionary movement, more concerned with feeding right-wing anger

than challenging the radicalisation of Muslims.

They don’t organise within Muslim communities. They don’t counteract the religious arguments of the Islamists with a class argument to address the real issues that affect and concern Muslims and non-Muslims alike. They don’t stand in solidarity with those who oppose the extremists in their own midst. And they don’t distinguish between issues of religious bigotry from those of religious freedom in order to distance themselves from the far-right and racism.

## “asking the government to ‘make a stand against extremism’ sets a very dangerous precedent”

This is the approach taken by militant anti-fascists, who counter the propaganda of the BNP and EDL with a working class perspective. We argue from this point of view precisely because it is this argument that both the far-right and the mainstream media have worked to obscure, and to twist in favour of a racial or national interpretation of the world.

Likewise, for working class Muslims there is an enormous effort to paint the world around them as defined by religion. The Islamic far-right talks of holy war in the Middle East, ignoring the fact that capitalism and the control of markets is the root of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not to mention the fact that it is poor Arabs and Muslims who are dying and being oppressed, whilst the wealthy are able to serve or integrate into the class of people who benefit from the war. They certainly don’t mention how the regimes they seek to implement are, elsewhere, crushing workers’ movements as readily as those for women’s and LGBT equality.

The aggressive ultra-nationalism of the EDL only pushes class further off the

agenda. Their approach allows community “leaders” – “moderate” as well as Islamist – to shore up their own position with the threat of outside invaders. It creates a sense of defiance that only exacerbates the division of the working class into supposedly homogenous “communities” based on race or religion, allowing the ruling class and various other interests to continue playing us off against one another.

Not only does such a situation make it harder for militant organisation against the various shades of far-right, it also thus makes it harder to organise around attacks on our class. The current climate of austerity is just one example, and questions of race and religion don’t merely distract from the matter at hand but turn us against one another whilst the ruling class wreaks havoc from above. This is how fascist regimes came to power in Europe in the 1930’s, but it is also how the totalitarian regimes of the Middle East keep class antagonism crushed under-foot. A populace mobilised in the cause of holy war, or contained by a climate of fear instilled by strict religious laws, necessarily finds it difficult to see anything other than faith as the prime mover of world affairs.

In response, what we need is militant working class self-organisation. Grass-roots mobilisation across all sectors of the working class, in the first instance, galvanises people to take a stand against threats such as fascism and Islamism.

But it is not just about defending the areas we live in from the forces of reaction. By organising in this way, we see the power that ordinary people can have, collectively, to make a difference. This helps to rebuild a genuine sense of community – based on vicinity, rather than faith or ethnicity – and the further organisational strength that this brings. Not only does this make anti-fascism far more effective, but it shores up our position in the broader class struggle.

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Paul Stott

# british islamism towards an anarchist response

In 2005 George Galloway defeated New Labour’s Oona King to win the parliamentary seat of Bethnal Green and Bow. It had been a highly charged campaign, with Galloway’s Respect Party working hard to particularly win over local Muslim voters due to King’s support for the disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq. Galloway, Respect and their backers celebrated at the East London Mosque, where Gorgeous George made it clear in his acceptance speech who he thanked for his victory: “I am indebted more than I can say, more than it would be wise – for them – for me to say, to the Islamic Forum of Europe. I believe they played the decisive role.”

This article aims to kick-start a debate about how Anarchists should respond to the development of Islam and Islamism, (which I define as the political presence of Islam and the desire to develop norms of Muslim behaviour) in the United Kingdom. It is a debate that is long overdue.

## Background

There are few things correct about Samuel

Huntingdon’s clash of civilisations thesis, but one element he did get right was in recognising that the late twentieth century saw a global Islamic resurgence. That resurgence was – and is – an event as important as the French or Russian revolutions. The French expert on Islamism, Gilles Kepel, traces this resurgence to material factors. Urbanisation and population increases brought about by medical improvements fractured traditional rural brands of Islam in countries such as Egypt and Pakistan. This combined with the coming to power of anti-colonial movements in the Muslim world. These governments – whether nationalist, monarchical or ‘Socialist’ – usually failed to deliver the aspirations of liberated peoples, and instead became characterised by corruption and incompetence. Islamic evangelism provided – and continues to provide – ‘answers’ to such problems. That answer is Islam, a complete design for living. And that answer is applicable globally.

As late as 1989, it was very rare to talk about British Muslims, or Muslim communities. The existence of a conscious, politi-

cal British Islamism arguably emerges from the most contentious background of any ‘ism’ – the agitation against Salman Rushdie, following his book *Satanic Verses*, and support for the death sentence issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Writers such as Kenan Malik and Anandi Ramamurthy have covered the fact that historically British Asian politics was both vibrant and often left leaning, via groups such as the Indian Workers’ Association and Pakistani Workers’ Association. A generic black or Asian identity was common – religious designation, and religious division only emerging after top down multiculturalism was introduced from both national and local government following the 1980s riots.

Here communities were given labels, political representatives found for those labelled, and resources and political influence distributed accordingly. The realisation that sections within Muslim communities, voting as blocs, could come to hold considerable political influence soon became evident to all of the major





political parties.

## Political Currents and Developments

As left communists Aufheben illustrate [in their article *Croissants and Roses*, 17/2009 – the ed.], this stripe of multi-culturalism has little to do with progressive politics. One of those instrumental in calling for a national Muslim representative body was Conservative right-winger Michael Howard. In the decades since the Rushdie affair, the Muslim Council of Britain and the Muslim Association of Britain have come to considerable prominence, and Kepele is not alone in arguing that this influence mirrors, in part, colonialism. Representatives of the local power simply cut deals, on a 'you scratch my back and I scratch yours' basis with the governing power. In time, it is in both sides' interest to maintain such arrangements, providing they work.

Many English cities have witnessed the curious sight of Asian (usually but not always Muslim) councillors switching overnight from one political party to another. During the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006 a group of Muslim councillors in Margaret Beckett's Derby constituency

made the shock discovery that the Labour government supported Israel and would not condemn it for bombing civilians. Whatever next! They promptly switched to the Lib Dems, although cynics suggested their move had more to do with thwarted local ambitions, and offers from their new party, than anything else. Perhaps the classic example of just how scurrilous local politics has become in some cities is the 2008 defection of Tower Hamlets Respect Councillor Ahmed Hussain – all the way to the Conservative Party!

It is important to stress the centrality of the mosque in some of these developments. For some years now a reading of sources as diverse as *Private Eye*, the *East London Advertiser*, academics such as Delwar Hussain or journalists like Andrew Gilligan would lead you to the conclusion that the most important political institution in east London is not the Labour Party or a trades union – it is East London Mosque, dominated by the Islamic Forum of Europe and Jamaat-e-Islami. The election of Galloway, and a mosque-backed Independent in the 2010 Tower Hamlets mayoral election, reinforced this. In Waltham Forest, at one point no fewer than 16 councillors were attending Lea Bridge Road mosque – what price political

openness and transparency in such circumstances?

It is worth noting that in office, Islamists have proved as useless at representing the interests of the working class as anyone else. Whilst Tower Hamlets residents are paying for the dubious honour of being a 'host' borough of the 2012 Olympics, all the events scheduled to occur in London's poorest local authority have now been moved somewhere else. Whilst Independent Mayor Lutfur Rahman mouths impotently about legal action to bring the marathon back to the East End, the Chairman of East London Mosque, Dr Muhammad Bari, sits alongside Princess Anne and Lord Coe on the board of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The presence of Dr Bari's beard ticks the multi-cultural box, but delivers nothing for the people of Tower Hamlets.

## Things That Go Bang

One area where national power expects local power to deliver is in the reduction of radicalisation and terrorist plots from Islamist youth. Although rarely acknowledged, a small, but not insignificant number of British Muslims have been fighting,

killing and dying in their version of Jihad for the best part of three decades, in places as diverse as Bosnia, Kashmir, Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Israel. The first British suicide bomber died in Srinagar as far back as 2000 – so much for the idea that such attacks solely occur because the government was stupid enough to follow the Americans into Iraq.

From 2009 Home Office figures, 92% of those in British prisons for terrorist offences affirm themselves to be Muslim. It is worth noting that these are not usually international actors – 62%, a clear majority, are British citizens. Since the 7/7 attacks the government has spent millions on de-radicalisation programmes, and a new term 'Al Qaeda inspired terrorism' has been coined. The fact that British Jihadis existed well before Osama Bin Laden's name was widely known is conveniently forgotten, and a concerted government and police drive has occurred to remove any religious terms from discourse about terrorism. This has been the backdrop to an on-going conflict between government and Muslim representative organisations. Programmes such as Preventing Violent Extremism have been attacked for 'stigmatising Muslims' until Prevent was extended to include the far-right and even, ludicrously, animal rights extremism.

One consequence of such arguments has been that each new conviction following a terrorist plot, or each involvement of a Briton in a plot abroad, is presented as a surprise, or attention is instead switched to exposing 'Islamophobic reporting' by the media, rather than the act itself. This reached surreal levels when the 2009 Christmas Day 'underpant bomber' became the fourth former executive member of a University Islamic Society to be involved in an attempt to commit the mass murder of civilians. The Federation of Student Islamic Societies responded by insisting there was no evidence Muslim students are more prone to radicalisation than anyone else. What more evidence do we need?

## An Anarchist Response?

Anarchists need to avoid the type of auto-

leftism that dominates certain groups. We should be better than simply repeating the discourse of 'Islamophobia', and Muslims solely as victims, that the left has produced readily since 9/11.

Secondly, as Anarchists we should fear religious belief per se – because of its irrationality, its treatment of women, its ability to divide human beings and its long association with injustice.

***"we should be better than simply repeating the discourse of 'Islamophobia', and Muslims solely as victims"***

We need to be realistic. Outside of the fantasies of the EDL and Muslims Against Crusades, shariah law is not about to be introduced in the UK. But there are politicians daft enough to cede power to shariah courts and Muslim Arbitration Tribunals at a local level (certainly for civil matters), and there are certainly Muslim organisations in our cities happy to soak up whatever power they can. If history has taught us anything, it should be that when power is ceded to religious currents, they rarely if ever give it back. Anarchist rejection of the law may not sit easily with campaigners such as Maryam Namazie and the One Law For All campaign, but we need to reflect on whether it is better to support such campaigns than see the consolidation of structures based on superstition, hierarchy and patriarchy.

Islamic organisations, backed by significant funding both from within the UK and abroad, are becoming a permanent presence in parts of the education and welfare systems. Having learned nothing from re-

ligiously divided education in Northern Ireland (where most children go to separate Protestant or Catholic schools from the age of five) the development of Muslim only schools is likely to not only do little for integration in our communities, but will even reverse it.

As London Mayor, Ken Livingstone awarded £1.6 million to East London Mosque for its welfare programmes – oh for the days when religious institutions that needed money for 'good work' did jumble sales! Such processes consolidate reactionary groups such as the Islamic Forum of Europe – they gain status, funding and power. There is no need for secular institutions to ask what services members of the public want or need when they can instead ask the mosque or any representative organisation that steps forward. We need to be aware Cameron's big society may provide further opportunities for such nonsense, not less.

We must also fear the increased racialisation of politics. If there is such a thing as the 'Muslim community' with elected representatives, there is by definition such a thing as the white community. And we should know where that brand of politics takes us. There is a need to stress the type of alternative, bottom up multi-culturalism that we live with and support daily – getting on with neighbours, colleagues and school friends as people, not as identities based on their colour or creed. Joining together with people as fellow workers and fellow members of working class communities targeted by cuts will be a lot easier on that basis, than the multi-culturalism of the state and the left.

Such an approach to me is Anarchism, and we need to stress that practice, whilst never abandoning Anarchist principles such as 'No Gods, No Masters', in the years to come.

Paul Stott is currently in the third year of a PhD 'British Jihadism: History, Theory, Practice'. Prior to that he was a member of the Class War Federation for 16 years. He blogs at <http://www.paulstott.typepad.com/>



# an interview with sociologist alberto toscano

Perhaps you could start by giving us a brief overview of your theory on fanaticism.

As the subtitle of the book [Fanaticism: On the uses of an idea] suggests, my aim in writing the book was to explore the way in which the idea of fanaticism has been polemically employed, in particular to stigmatize doctrines and subjects that stray from certain normative understandings of politics. Unlike certain sociologists and political scientists (most recently Gérard Bronner), I have not produced a theory of fanaticism as a more or less unified phenomenon, but rather a critical analysis of some key episodes of intellectual and political history in which the accusation of fanaticism has played a prominent and symptomatic role (the Radical Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Cold War). A conceptual history

of fanaticism reveals a systematically ambivalent or even paradoxical term, which is marshalled to oppose excessive universalisms and intransigent particularisms, steadfast atheism and religious allegiance, modernist utopianism and supposed atavisms. What intrigued me about this Janus-headed notion is the manner in which it combines two ideological traits of our allegedly post-ideological present: the condemnation of political projects aimed at radical social transformation and the identification of threats to 'the West' in absolutist religious movements. Heirs to both the Cold War denunciations of communism as a political religion and to a colonial discourse of counter-insurgency targeted at the fanaticism of religious revolts, many of those who today plead for Western civilisation and Enlightenment against internal and external extremisms repeat that peculiar trait of anti-fanatical discourse: the use of the very same idea to

denounce a universalist politics of abstraction and a religious reaction to imperialism. To the extent that our political common sense has been shaped by the various polemics against fanaticism, any attempt to revive a radical politics of emancipation has to confront fanaticism's history and its enduring uses. Two in particular deserve attention: the suspicion of a 'politics of abstraction' that would disastrously reduce the complexity of social life, and the view of fanaticism as a levelling of social differentiation – whether in the guise of the secular state's transcendence over religious and cultural affiliation or in that of the separation between the political and the economic. As I try to show in the fifth chapter of the book, we can take our cue from aspects of Marx's account of religious, political and economic abstractions to move beyond the invidious either/or: liberalism or fanaticism.

Alongside radical Italian writers collective Wu Ming, you recently contributed to a new collection of speeches given by Thomas Müntzer, radical Protestant leader of the 1524-25 peasant rebellion against the political-religious establishment. In his 1850 title *The Peasant Wars in Germany*, Engels became the first to read the peasant revolts as an expression of class conflict, albeit articulated through the only language available at the time i.e. that of religion; would you agree with this position? If so, we wonder what emancipatory potential and limitations you see in a) these historical antecedents to modern anti-capitalism; and b) religious movements.

While I think there is still considerable mileage in a class analysis of religious mobilization, Engels's model risks relying excessively on the presumption that capitalist modernity brings to an end the disjunction between social relations and consciousness that gives religion its emancipatory rationality in pre-capitalist times. This means that Engels both overestimates the necessity of theology (some peasant programmes, for instance that of Gaismaier in the Tyrol, are remarkably 'materialist' in their demands) and underestimated the manner in which religious languages persist in the context of capitalism's uneven and combined development (a phenomenon acutely identified by Mike Davis in terms of the "re-enchantment of catastrophic modernity"). That said, Engels does emphasise a striking temporal and ideological dimension of the interaction between political contestation and religious vision, when he notes that the peasant's rearguard millenarian resistance against a rising capitalism also allowed them to anticipate a future beyond capitalism. This utopian surplus was the object of Ernst Bloch's fascination with this moment, and of his refusal to accept that the relationship between the economic, the political and the religious (or better, the utopian) was to be conceived according to a linear, progressive concept of time. As for the lessons to be learned from such moments, aside from the abiding attraction of their languages of transfiguration and refusal, things are not so clear. They

are movements that respond to the violence and anomie of the imposition of capitalist social relations on other forms of life, and could thus be regarded, to borrow from Beverley Silver, as 'Polanyi-type' defensive movements against the capitalist expropriation of the commons and the disembedding of the economy from society. In that sense, they are of scant use for thinking of political opposition in worlds really subsumed by capital. On another level, the intransigent affirmation of another – even transcendent – justice, or the repudiation – even of a moral type – of this world, are not easily discarded by a politics of emancipation.

**“some have suggested that Marx would have done better to write of the cocaine of the masses”**

For better and (most often) for worse, religious movements flourish when the sense that justice is immanent in the ways of this world wanes. But their motivational power is often inversely proportional to their capacity to identify the levers of real change.

We'd now like to concentrate on the relevance of all this for modern day political movements – both progressive and reactionary – many of which, particularly those on the far right, are now engaged in conversations surrounding religion. Is Marx's phrase "the opium of the people" still relevant? What did he actually mean by it?

'Religion' is such a polysemic term that it is often extremely difficult to identify precisely what is at stake in the supposed resurgence of religion as a political force. My impression is that, aside from well-circumscribed academic domains with little political influence, political-theological de-

bate is of little contemporary import, and that religion as experience, or even ecstasy, is also a rather marginal concern. What is really at stake today is the refunctioning of certain doctrinal and cultural repertoires to fashion large-scale collective solidarities in political, social and economic contexts marked by anomie, anxiety, crisis, catastrophe, disaggregation, and the ravaging advance of seemingly unstoppable military or economic powers. Unlike irreligious universalisms, religion can both be a goad to militancy (in this sense some have suggested that Marx would have done better to write of the cocaine of the masses...) and a salve against the painful experience of history (opium was medically used in the nineteenth as a painkiller, not just for intoxication). This ambivalence gives it considerably greater resilience than worldly ideologies for which failure can often appear as a terminal indictment. That said, I think it is important to note that, when it comes to politics, the supposed return of religion (itself a sociologically problematic notion, as one can make a strong argument for de facto secularisation in terms of everyday practices) is more a by-product of the drastic setbacks to emancipatory projects and ideals than it is the re-emergence of something 'repressed' by a secular 'age of extremes'.

In terms of how your theory of fanaticism contributes to our understanding of liberal democracy, we'd like to refer to the work of such as Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek regarding post-politics (see also Shift's Issue 8 interview with Erik Swyngedouw). These thinkers have made the claim that in our current post-political condition, dissident voices face a choice between incorporation into and neutralisation by the liberal democratic consensus on one hand, and being written off as fundamentalists or extremists on the other. Does your work on fanaticism have anything to say on this, for example on whether this is really a new phenomenon? And how can radical emancipatory social movements respond to such a situation?

Not only is this not a new phenomenon, most of the arsenal of anti-emancipatory



criticism and invective is already in place by the time of Edmund Burke's *Reflections* on the Revolution in France, to be periodically dusted off and reused whenever there is a threat to the political norm – whence the staggering lack of insight or originality in phenomena like the French *nouveaux philosophes* of the late 1970s, or their contemporary epigones. At the same time, excessive concern with one's ideological detractors, especially when they're of quite low calibre, is debilitating, whether it means trying to pre-empt their criticisms (bending over backwards to show one is not a 'totalitarian', in what cannot but appear a partial admission of guilt) or over-identifying with the accusation to provoke one's adversaries. Radical social movements would be better off attending to the interesting history of the Left's internal critiques of extremism (be it in Marxian critiques of Jacobinism, Leninist critiques of ultra-leftism, anarchist critiques of Leninism, left-communist critiques of Party idolatry – a whole history of 'fanaticism' that still remains to be explored), but also at trying to define radicalism in terms that are not merely mirroring those of their accusers. As contemporary movements around health, education, public services or the commons demonstrate, there are many demands that are both difficult to stigmatise as extremist (e.g. free education) but which at the same time contain remarkable anti-systemic potential. This is the irony of a world in which what Mark Fisher has aptly dubbed 'capitalist realism' makes it so that seemingly reformist goals have a kind of millenarian aura.

Finally we'd like to ask you about the relevance of your ideas on fanaticism for the Left's relationship with Islam. How can the Left relate to fascist groups such as the EDL who oppose a political Islam to secular ultra-nationalism on the other? Similarly, what would a non-liberal/radical critique of religious fanaticism look like?

The EDL is a racist organisation and is obviously to be dealt with like the various far-right groups that have preceded it, and which it continues to overlap with (namely the BNP). Its rhetoric of a non-partisan opposition to political Islam is a thin veneer over a particularly disturbing mutation of

racist thuggery. Aside from the necessity of making common front in local, national and transnational struggles against racism, I don't think the Left needs to develop a particular relationship to 'Islam', any more than to 'Christianity' or 'Hinduism'. First of all, it is dangerous to reproduce the governmental rhetoric, often verging on the neo-colonial, of 'Muslim communities' or the retrograde idea that being a Muslim (or a Christian, or a Jew) is somehow transitive with political identity. This can lead to a culturalist condescension that impedes political development. If individuals or groups which draw inspiration from their religious allegiances support egalitarian, anti-capitalist politics then it's obvious that leftist movements should explore alliances with them. A critique of religious politics has to be part of a broader critique of abstractions, that is of the manner in which abstract entities can domi-

nate human collectives – whether their form is that of the State, Capital or God (and these forms of domination obviously differ greatly, and relate to one another in intricate ways, such that we can have a 'religion of Capital' as well as capitalist religions). The distorted universalisms peddled by repressive forms of religious politics have to be countered by projects of social and political emancipation that can channel or recode their anti-systemic drives and truly challenge the narrowness of religious allegiances (which in the final analysis are never fully universal, contrary to contemporary paeans to the atheism in Christianity) at the level of everyday life.

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Polly N.

## nirvana holds no promise of 'life after capitalism'

There is a blind spot where the subject of Buddhism is concerned in certain 'activist' and lefty circles. Where religion as a whole is condemned as dogmatic and regressive, Buddhism often escapes the critic's disdain unscathed. This is not necessarily a bad thing; such criticisms are often formulaic and react to the concept of religion without a semblance of informed engagement with the teachings themselves.

Three points are often cited for the argument that Buddhism should not be understood on the same terms as other religions, namely that Buddhism denies the existence of a god, that Buddhism denies the existence of the soul and that Buddhism is an empirical, experience-based teaching; followers being expected to test teachings for themselves through personal experience rather than accept them with 'blind faith'. Whether or not Buddhism can be regarded as a religion according to the same criteria as other world religions is a question that has occupied commentators on the subject for centuries. I will not attempt to resolve it here, but I will, for the

sake of the article, consider it as such; it seems to me that denying Buddhism's position alongside other world religions is the result of a reductive reading of the material available to us. Or else it is an ill considered excuse for the spiritually inclined 'atheist'. It is not my intention to cast aspersions on the spiritually inclined, simply to get things straight – if religion is what you're after, Buddhism's not a bad one to go for. But if you seek in Buddhism a vehicle for historical change and social emancipation, you will come up against fundamental limitations.

I intend to do two things in this article, firstly to explore, in brief, the social and political history of Tibet and Lamaism in Tibet in order to examine some of the complexities around the West's idealisation of the country. I see no purpose in revisiting the dialectical dispute between the traditional Left and the Human Rights position. On no level do I defend the occupation, neither am I comfortable with the idealising of any culture, as though it were some essential quality of a 'people' (a very

un-Buddhist position, incidentally). Secondly, I will explore some of the core teachings of the Buddhist scriptures and consider their compatibility with certain core assumptions held within activist circles.

Like all world religions Buddhism can be found in many different avatars across the globe. This article is concerned with a particular image of the 'undogmatic' Buddhism that is enshrined within leftist circles in the West. This interpretation of Buddhism is based, most explicitly, on Tibetan Buddhism and so Tibetan Buddhism is the focus of this discussion.

A religion is not synonymous with the culture it exists within and to discuss Buddhism is not to discuss Tibet. However, an idea enshrined in the minds of many progressives is that of the Tibetan people's staunch position on non-violence and their regard for all sentient beings. With this in mind, it is not surprising that the Free Tibet movement dominates much of the West's awareness of global human rights concerns – after all, Tibet is under-



stood to be a peaceful, egalitarian society in which all human and animal life is respected and cherished, ruled over by a tyrannical regime. I don't want to undermine this position absolutely. Certainly the Chinese rule of Tibet is deeply problematic, to say the least, but the particular idealising of Tibet common in the West is no less so and, furthermore, serves primarily to dehumanise Tibetans and reduce their emancipatory process to a non-political struggle.

## Tibet

If we look at historical accounts of Lamaism in Tibet, the picture that emerges is rather different from the idealised, romantic visions perpetrated by Western supporters of the religion. There is nothing particularly nasty or exploitative about the history of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, relative to the history of the world, but neither is it an idealised utopia that is separated from the bloody history of the world. The narratives of exploitation, class and inequality persist everywhere.

Until the late 1950s, Tibet looked like many other feudal societies we are familiar with. The land was largely owned by wealthy monasteries and secular landlords, divided up into manorial estates and worked by serfs. The land owners accumulated enormous levels of wealth at the expense of peasants' labour. Serfs were tied in lifelong bonds to work the land of the masters and were subjected to heavy taxation. Monasteries acted like banks, lending money to pay the taxes and charging such high levels of interest that many were held in debt to them for years.

Physical violence and religious conflict were certainly not absent in pre-1959 Tibet, either. Punishment for petty crimes was often brutal and monasteries fought between themselves over land possession and local power. In short then, the power structures in 'old' Tibet were no better, and no worse, than those in feudal Europe. And just as in Europe, industrialisation did not deliver on the promises of peace and prosperity.

There is no justification for the Chinese oppression in Tibet, try as many contemporary Maoists might to find one, but nei-

ther can we say that the Chinese destroyed an ancient culture of non-violence and harmony. 'Culture', indeed, seems to be the buzzword for many Free Tibet campaigners, omitting that there is nothing natural, unchanging or authentic in the patterns of social life. If anything, the Chinese occupation has taken a feudal society into the transition towards (state-)capitalism; not communism.

## **"Compassion is the ultimate articulation of Buddhist practice, but it is a spiritual, rather than political, articulation"**

And with the large patterns of migration brought about by industrialisation, mainly of Han Chinese into Tibet, the post-feudal society has had to deal with a significant amount of ethnic tension. Chinese ownership of factories and shops, and their political power, has not made redundant an analysis of exploitation based on class, but it has added nationalist sentiments to the mix. Man has the ruthless capacity to rule over other Men, and over his natural environment. Religion can at times provide justifications for this rule and at other times can do the opposite.

## The road to Nirvana

The real area of contention when considering Buddhism from a progressive, emancipatory perspective is to be found in its core teachings. All too frequently reduced to non-violence and meditation, a cornerstone of Buddhist thought is the principle of 'Dukkha', or suffering. According to Buddhist philosophy, all life is suffering, suffering is caused by grasping, or desire, and the only escape from suffering is to break the cycle of life, death and rebirth -

'Samsāra' - and achieve 'Nirvana'.

In Buddhist literature, 'Dukkha' is illustrated using the image of a potter's wheel. A person experiencing suffering is like a rusty, old wheel. As the wheel turns, it squeaks and creaks and sticks at certain points in its cycle. A person who is free of suffering is like a perfectly oiled wheel, turning smoothly and quietly on its axis.

The sticking point here is that these key Buddhist teachings present an ahistorical and therefore inward looking account of suffering. Buddhist philosophy holds that suffering is implicit in the realm of human existence, so emancipation is achieved not by changing society but by escaping from it. The nature of the universe is constant fluctuation, the nature of Man is grasping for permanence, therefore, constantly disappointed by reality, Man's only reasonable response is to remove himself from it entirely.

The nature of the universe and the nature of unenlightened Man combine to make suffering unavoidable. The constantly changing universe is the problem, not the particular society that Man has created, and so there is no struggle that he can embark on to change it, other than an internal one. Capitalism, exploitation and inequality become 'manifestations' of suffering, rather than reasons for it.

Even the language of activism appears out of place here - to struggle is to grasp, to grasp is to bring about disappointment, disappointment is suffering. Activism is necessarily action-based and Buddhism is necessarily based on the philosophy of stillness as a means of removal from suffering.

One way of looking at this distinction is that Buddhism advises inner change for the sake of personal emancipation and progressive politics demands outer change for the sake of human emancipation. In defence of Buddhism, though, the perfect response to the attainment of enlightenment is the choice to remain within the cycle of 'Samsāra' as a 'Bodhisattva' and to work to bring about the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

Compassion is the ultimate articulation of



Buddhist practice, but it is a spiritual, rather than a political, articulation. A Buddhist story tells of Siddhattha Gotama's journey to enlightenment, which is said to equal the period of time it would take to wear away a mountain by stroking it with a sheet of silk once every hundred years. The striving for emancipation on a global scale, then, becomes meaningless without subscribing to the entire Buddhist metaphysical position. Without the patience of the enlightened mind suffering the world over is inevitable for a very, very long time.

Of course, to take the philosophy of self-responsibility, combined with the metaphysical assumptions of multiple life-times and realms of existence, to its logical conclusion brings us to the rather uncomfortable position that social inequality, wealth, physical handicap and all other distinguishing factors are merely the result of worthy or sinful actions committed in past lives. Conversely then, this philosophy of self-reliance arcs back on itself (a never ending Möbius strip) and becomes the ultimate irresponsibility - unconscious of

the lifetime which gestated the fruits of my fortune, I am free to take no responsibility for them in this one. Karma becomes the irrefutable, all embracing alibi.

This metaphysical justification for our social positions renders emancipatory struggle futile. Rather, we are advised to cultivate Right Action and Right Mindfulness and trust that the fruits of our labour will be revealed to us in future lifetimes. Sickness and poverty, then, become the result of an unenlightened mind (the sicker, the more unenlightened) whilst wealth and health are the just rewards of deserving actions in the past. A social critique based on the politics of power and inequality is uncalled for here. That Buddhism encourages compassion and the goal of 'enlightenment for all' seems (to the unenlightened mind, perhaps) a poor substitute for equal access to food and health care in this lifetime.

In 1996, the Dalai Lama apparently issued a statement that read, in part, "Marxism is founded on moral principles, while capital-

ism is concerned only with gain and profitability. [Marxism fosters] the equitable utilisation of the means of production [and cares about] the fate of the working classes... For those reasons the system appeals to me, and . . . I think of myself as half-Marxist, half-Buddhist."

It is a nice sentiment and, in a sense, might transcend a certain 'narcissism of minor difference', except that the difference between Buddhism and Marxism isn't really very minor, and the core difference is situated precisely in the Dalai Lama's definition of Marxism - that is based on moral principles. But understanding the struggle against capitalism as a 'historical materialism', this surely stands at odds with the ahistorical and non-social view of 'change' in the Buddha's teachings.

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# 'no messy politics please, we're anarchists!'

**"we met with bolivian political actors both within and without the state, who having fought side-by-side on the barricades now find themselves in very different political territory"**

SHIFT provides a space for those of us defining as anarchists and based in the UK to 'constructively' critique ideas and movements. As the participants from the No Borders network referred to by Dariush Sokolov in his article Cochabamba: Beyond the Complex – Anarchist Pride (printed in Shift issue #9), who took part in the First World People's Conference on Climate Change (CMPCC), we want to engage with the dialogue opened in #9. We agree with several of the points made, particularly the calling out of "economies based on the same model of petroleum, industrial agriculture, extraction, and growth before everything". However, we reject a simplistic notion of relishing 'our' minority anarchist status. Here we reflect on the chasm we see between maintaining 'purity' of ideology and the reality of actually doing politics.

To be clear, we were always critical of what

is going on in Bolivia and of other 'progressive' governments in Latin America. The glaring contradiction between Evo Morales' anti-capitalist/eco saviour speeches and his ongoing extractivist industrialisation is just one of the reasons we wanted to attend, to hear what was going on and to report back. In all its complexity we felt that the CMPCC, coming as it did, hot on the tails of the fuck up that was COP-15, was an important event to engage with.

We spent a month in Bolivia participating in the summit working groups, workshops and panels on borders, militarisation, and climate migration, the autonomous parallel process known as Mesa 18, and various mobilisations. The booklet that we co-wrote on our return, Space for Movement – Reflections from Bolivia on Climate Justice, Social Movements and the State, is based on interviews with some of the people

we met, and wrestles with big questions that the conference raises.

Dariush's article suggests that we asked to go as delegates and that this was 'ejected' by the No Borders network meeting. The problems of representation in non-hierarchical groups is not our focus here. However, our perspective is that when we sought agreement to refer to ourselves as part of the UK No Borders network, at least some of our comrades appreciated that we were asking for input, supported us going as individuals, and understood our reasons. To imply that we were ignorant of the power politics we were entering into was, to be honest, insulting.

The potency of serious political positions are too often trivialised in the mainstream, by reducing people to inaccurate categories (e.g. 'layabouts' or 'violent thugs'). On the other side, 'we' seem all too ready to



resort to equally lazy labelling, when we maybe want to make a real political point? We would like to ask, who are the white, English-speaking, privileged, careerists laden with middle-class guilt that Dariush refers to in his article? What if one of 'us' who went to the CMPCC was a working-class queer person of colour, fed up with being invisibilised and treated as a 'minority' both within the mainstream and the activist ghetto? For a generalisation to exclude the exception, to make this mistake even once, is to deny the political identity and positionality of all those who do not fit the stereotype. This creates yet another psychological border separating 'us' from 'them' within our very own movements.

These labels are powerful, isn't that why we resist categorisations? For example, we highlighted problems with the term climate refugee in draft statements of the CMPCC, and pushed for the inclusion of

references to repressive migration controls. A minor change yes, but these battles on the level of discourse are important, especially when we consider how political views are often formed, articulated and negotiated through written and spoken language.

Some of our strengths as anarchists include our refusal to be duped or easily seduced. Our critical minds question everything and, with apparently no positions of privilege to defend, we are willing to call out hierarchy and power wherever we encounter it. But, if the way we do this means that even people involved in anti-authoritarian groups and active in networks are called upon to doubt their political convictions, is it any wonder that others are put off from joining us in struggle? We will continue to honestly debate our actions, but we will also call out problems that we see within 'our' minority.

Of course we need shared values and principles but 'we' seem too quick to judge, without seeking to understand each other's motivations. This can lead to a hypercritical tendency that seeks to defend an imagined ideological 'purity'. Who is the judge? Who sets the standards? Can someone be polluted by a particular action, the vegan who eats honey, the environmentalist who takes a flight, the No Borders activist who works with the local church-led refugee group? With our almost insurmountable mountain of radical positions, do we exclude those not up to the mark or do they simply choose not to participate? Unchallenged this rigidity inhibits our ability to create strong, diverse movements.

**Climate change is here:**

This brings us to the elephant in the room. The co-option of climate change discourses



es, by everyone from the BNP to consumer ad campaigns, seems to have led many anarchists to conclude that there is no point engaging at all with 'the biggest threat to humanity and the planet'. We see that this position, although an understandable response, risks slipping towards collective denial or nihilism. Climate change is a real and current war on the world's poor and whether we like it or not it does impact heavily on the global context we are working in. Increased militarisation of borders is just one state response to this reality that negates freedom and equality. We remain committed to fighting for climate justice, even though we are suspicious of how this discourse has already been framed and manipulated.

The SHIFT editorial made the valid point that fetishisation of carbon emissions associated with flights detracts from the real systemic cause of the crisis, i.e. capitalism. In this they concur with much of the discourse coming from Bolivia, as Evo says, it's a matter of life and death; patriarchy, imperialism, capitalism are all threatening life on earth. Morales and other ALBA leaders propose their vision of global socialism as the only solution, and that's where of course we differ. However, sharing some common analysis of causes, even at the level of rhetoric, we saw that it was important to enter into the sticky, grey areas of dialogue in order to distinguish our solutions.

Too often the millions of people that are expected to be displaced by climate change are referred to only in terms of 'overpopulation' and a threat to be managed. Statistics get bounded around, numbers of people, black numbers on white paper but what do they mean? At the first major international gathering of social movements which put climate migration on the agenda, we ensured that borders and increased militarisation were visible and argued that freedom of movement for all and freedom to stay are crucial to emerging climate justice discourses (see the article Freedom of Movement and Borders in an age of Climate Chaos on our blog).

As Dariush says, Bolivia does indeed still have borders, an army, prisons. In our work there, we heard different contextual

understandings and certainly realised the Eurocentric basis of a No Borders position. For many it is the ability to keep out rich, Northern corporations and NGOs that was seen as the function of a border regime. But in a country where anti-capitalism seems to be the rule rather than the exception, with strong transnational solidarity and indigenous rejection of nation states, we found that what is often a freakish political position in Europe, for many, seemed uncontroversial.

**“The borders that divide us exist primarily in our collective imagination, but they rupture our ability to imagine ourselves as a collective.”**

*(a participant in our workshop at CMPCC)*

There is much to be said for embracing the outsidership of being an anarchist, especially in influencing power dynamics within and between movements. However, contrary to Dariush's assertion that, "our desires and beliefs are largely out of step with those of just about everyone else we ever meet," we found more in common than we had imagined. Many of the problems we encounter today have come about as a result of minority groups forming around collective ideologies, dreams and demands, which are imposed on the majority through coercion. Whilst the current anarchist movement is a minority in numbers, it is surely our belief in basic shared collective desires within the majority that calls us to organise, to act, to speak out, and to face the consequences. Movements will form, uprisings will happen,

whether we are in them or not. But we believe that it is crucial that we locate ourselves in the wider struggle, and to do this we need to create relationships of mutual respect and spaces for dialogue.

Bolivia can be seen as an example of how movements are co-opted, how states can adopt radical rhetoric without relinquishing domination and control. We met with Bolivian political actors both within and against the state, who having fought side-by-side on the barricades now find themselves in very different political territory. There are ongoing struggles and attempts to expose the attacks on the social base that brought the ruling party, Movement for Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS), to power. However, for many Bolivians who were part of this process, there is no clear good/bad position when it comes to Morales and the MAS government. One compañera spoke passionately of her distrust of their socialist project, and a deep sense of betrayal from former comrades (see recent open letter to Evo Morales at <http://narconews.com/Issue67/article4292.html>). She was clear though that had we been from the right, she would have articulated her position differently to us. The threat from the European descendent oligarchs and the outside powers and financiers that support them remains strong. There is much to challenge, but also to necessarily defend. Bolivians we met didn't seem 'duped', but repeatedly told us that it wasn't about one man or one party, but about a wider push for change from below that would inevitably take many paths.

So how does this relate to what's going on this winter on these islands? Who hasn't asked themselves recently, why, when the system continues to expose itself; the banking crisis, MP's expenses, police brutality etc, there isn't more resistance? In an unfolding climate of coalitions and community organising in the UK against the cuts and the unprecedented attacks on the working-class, it's crucial that we take ourselves to where politics is happening. This is what we call messy politics. This is also when our 'ghetto' can truly serve its purpose, providing nourishment, support, etc. Everytime we step out of our comfort zones, there is a balance to be found be-



tween staying true to our beliefs and actually engaging with people. Ultimately, each one of us has to reconcile these tendencies and we don't argue here for any one strategy; however we echo Bristol Anarchists against the Cuts;

“For us at least is not about tunnel vision on the anarchist utopia and everything else can go to hell...If anarchists only involve themselves with the clandestine then they risk becoming even more marginalised at a time where we could be making headway.”

Despite mainstream media portrayals, the recent student protests were not an anarchist conspiracy shielding itself behind witless and innocent young scholars. They

were however, in Bristol at least, infused from within and without with a little of that anarchist pride and rage, and have been practically, tactically and ideologically supported by local autonomous spaces and anarchist groups. Revelling in our minority status stands in contrast to seeing ourselves as part of a much broader struggle. The real work of building bridges, of developing true mutual aid and solidarity entails remembering that we're not always right, being willing to admit our collective shortfalls and that we have things to learn too. To bring about real transformative, social change, exclusivity in our movements must be challenged, both in the global context of the bio-crisis, and in our locally based struggles. Once we accept that uneasy or unlikely alliances

will at times be inevitable, we can begin the real work of how to build internally strong movements that can resist internal break down or external neutralisation. Or are we really more interested in dividing people into friends and foes?

Alice and Yaz live in Bristol and have been involved in the No Borders network for several years. The blog from their time in Bolivia is [ayya2cochabamba.wordpress.com](http://ayya2cochabamba.wordpress.com). The booklet they co-wrote on their return is downloadable in English and Spanish <http://spaceformovement.wordpress.com>.



# from the defence of the present to the control of the future

**“the ‘anti-cuts’ form of expression contains an inherently ‘conservative’ frequency. it is not a collective belief or feeling that there can be other futures, but a demand that the world must remain the same”**

The recent student unrest has massively expanded political possibilities in the UK and Europe. The game is afoot and the next move is to generalise the struggle beyond the education sector. For many an ‘anti-cuts’ message is the way to do this. There is a danger, however, that the logic of this position contains the mechanism of its own failure. We urgently need to foment a shift away from a politics that defends our own powerlessness, to one where we can become the collective authors of our own histories.

The last month has finally seen hope raise its head again. Spilling across liberated streets, universities, banks and politicians’ offices, the question can be heard echoing – ‘is this what making history feels like?’ Beginning with the tired press hysteria surrounding the ‘violence of Millbank’ on the 10th November, hundreds of thousands of school, college and university students have been in a state of permanent mobilisation. Over the following month, at least 27 universities experienced an ‘occupied space’ of some sort, each with its own distinct political and social relationships.

Beyond these ‘traditional’ but undoubtedly diverse campus occupations, the Uni-

versity of Strategic Optimism have conducted successful lectures in a branch of Lloyds TSB and a Tesco supermarket, the offices of Liberal Democrat MP John Hemming were briefly taken over, a Lib-Dem conference was forced to ‘re-schedule’ under the security threat posed by potential mass protests, the Really Open University conducted a three-day workshop series in Leeds beginning the Re-imagining of the University, and students occupied the Tate Britain gallery hours before the (once) prestigious Turner Prize ceremony was due to take place. Alongside the student mobilisations, the UK Uncut network has emerged, organising creative disruptions of ‘tax-dodging’ corporations such as Vodafone and Topshop. Then there was 9th December – a day when, after a high level of generalised disobedience culminating in the poking of the Duchess of Cornwall through the window of her Rolls-Royce, David Cameron was forced to concede that ‘the small’ minority’ could no longer be used to explain away social unrest.

So far, these diverse interventions, expressions and events seem to be resonating together. While the mechanisms of connection aren’t always totally clear, each occurrence seems to be amplifying, and be-

ing amplified by, the others. What is far from clear, however, is the ‘frequency’ on which this resonance is taking place. To put this differently we might ask, what is the shared politics that ties these events together?

## Dissecting the defence of the present

*“Why do men [sic] fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?”*  
Baruch Spinoza

The dominant political logic of the unfolding events appears blindingly obvious: ‘We are all against the education fees and cuts! That is why we act together!’ This is the official story portrayed in the press, whilst National Union of Students (NUS) President Aaron Porter is unequivocal in stating that ‘students have taken to the streets to protest against the government’s attacks on further and higher education’. Placards on marches across the country proclaim ‘Stop Education Cuts!’ with numerous variations thereof. Notably, school and college students have been brought to the streets and the occupations through the proposed scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). Some, not least the NUS, have attempted to add a



party-political spin to all this through calls of hypocrisy towards the Liberal Democrats; a placard on a London march perhaps best summed this up – ‘Shame on you for turning blue’.

The Browne Report and the Comprehensive Spending Review have undoubtedly been a catalyst in getting a limited cohort of people, most of whom are students of some kind, to ‘take to the streets’. However, to cast the recent contestations within an ‘anti-cuts’ framework is to make an inherently political decision that places strict conditions and limitations on future events. This isn’t to say that we shouldn’t be against the government cutting EMA, or withdrawing funding for teaching and research for all non-STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – eds.] subjects. On the contrary, it is suggesting that making ‘anti-cuts’ demands the key form of expression for the movement could leave us tied to the very conditions against which we are so vocally opposed.

This appears paradoxical; how can you be complicit in the conditions which you are opposing? The problem lies in the reactive nature of the ‘anti-cuts’ position. To paraphrase Werner Bonefeld speaking at last

year’s Anarchist Bookfair [published in this issue of SHFIT – eds.], ‘being ‘anti-cuts’ is not a political expression’ – it is an empty or vacated position that remains characterised by the conditions against which it resists. It is this unplaceable emptiness that characterises the reactionary form of expression; it is precisely ‘empty’ of any collectively articulated values, dreams or desires. As such, the ‘anti-cuts’ form of expression contains an inherently ‘conservative’ frequency. It is not a collective belief or feeling that there can be other futures, but a demand that the world must remain the same – united in the defence of a scenario in which nothing changes.

The political rationale of the ‘anti-cuts’ position is therefore not the collective creation of different conditions of existence, but rather a negotiation of the conditions of the present. Forgoing the collective potential for us to author our own histories, it unwittingly participates in negotiating the social conditions in which existing historical processes can continue – the exacerbation of social inequalities and the continued exploitation of the many for the benefit of the few. The danger in the anti-cuts expression is that it comes to represent social inertia, rather than social

movement – a commitment to the conditions of the present.

And what of the conditions of the present? Do we really want to defend these moribund, anti-social and elitist institutions? In the case of the university, its role has historically been to reproduce a small elite – normally from highly privileged backgrounds – capable of filling social roles of ‘governance’, either as politicians or as bosses. Although this filtering process is still very much a feature of the highly variegated universities, the university as an institution increasingly operates as a machine to produce a new form of docile, precarious, yet highly trained worker appropriate for the ‘contemporary state of the economy’. The university now operates as a factory producing a steady supply of multi-faceted immaterial labourers capable of working effectively in the cultural and information industries.

Within the university itself, the imposition of numerous metric systems leads to the consistent degradation of both teaching and research. The sole purpose of teaching has increasingly become to ensure students ‘get a job’; all focus turns to the ‘employability factor’ of courses, as academic-managers increasingly pander



to the demands of corporations in shaping course content. Working conditions become increasingly precarious, as part-time and sessional contracts proliferate and everyone from support staff to senior academics are expected to 'unofficially' extend their working days. Smart phones and wireless broadband means there is no longer an excuse to not be plugged into the edu-nexus 24/7 – the edu-product must be delivered at all costs. If you aren't responding to an angry email from a disgruntled

student whilst you are taking a shit on the toilet, then you aren't working hard enough!

The imposition of an 'anti-cuts' expression serves to endorse what currently exists, to validate institutions that separate and compartmentalise society in the private interest. But it also mistakes the terrain upon which the current struggle is taking place. The primary purpose of the 'cuts' is not the reduction of a temporary deficit in

the public finances. They are, rather, aimed at further entrenching a certain conception of the future. By altering the composition of society they seek to eliminate other possible futures. This means that any movement that emerges in response to the 'cuts' must also operate on the same terrain. We can't do so, however, by agreeing upon a single alternative blueprint of the future, around which we would then unite. You fight the closing down of possibility by opening it up, by widening the

field of potential historical actors – we are engaged in a battle over the conditioning of the future.

## What keeps a movement moving?

*"Withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality... Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable". Michel Foucault*

Our critique of reactive politics does not assume that this position prevails amongst those who have been taking to the streets and lecture theatres. There have been many moments over the last months that have exceeded this logic; indeed it is the nature of movement to exceed.

Social movements form in relation to specific issues and the logic of those issues influence the initial shape and composition of the movement. As the current movement formed in relation to 'cuts' in education, many assumed that the movement would come to understand itself in terms of an inter-generational antagonism, as those who benefited from a free education pull the ladder up behind them. In fact, the movement has primarily defined itself in terms of both the need for extra-parliamentary action (inaugurated by a boot through the window of Conservative Party HQ), and the re-emergence of class as a legitimate way of talking about politics (even if the operative conception of class is still quite static and sectional – "David Cameron – Fuck off back to Eton").

This can reveal to us a more universal dynamic – movements move because they exceed the specific issues of their emergence. Movements create an excess, they are more than the sum of their parts. If movements are to continue to move then they need to find forms of expression for this excess. This does not usually involve creation out of nothing, it often involves certain elements of the movement turning away from mere function and towards expression. A movement comes to understand itself through expressing itself and it is by gaining control over this expression that the movement gains control over

its own movement.

In the case of the Global Justice movement, it was a certain form of organisational process that turned from function to expression; consensus decision making became central to how the movement came to define itself. What was at first a seemingly unremarkable method of facilitating meetings became a motive force that opened up a new field of potentials and came to mark a new conception of politics. Of course the form of expression need not be an organisational form, it is also possible that the wheel will turn a full circle and that certain demands may become an expression of the excess of the movement. Directional demands () are designed precisely for this purpose; what takes precedence is not the demands themselves, but the positive compositional effect they have on the 'movement actors'.

There is of course the danger that these very expressions – which at one point were exciting and dynamic processes that collided beings and events together in new ways – become stagnant, having a pacifying effecting on movement. Perhaps the most recently identifiable stagnation was the 'camping' refrain that took hold of the Camp for Climate Action. That refrain, which emerged out of an earlier cycle of street-protests against intergovernmental summits, provided an exciting compositional effect that changed how and what was possible. The idea of a yearly camp, however, reflects a certain understanding of what is possible, it reflects a certain, low, level of intensity of the struggle. Both of which inform a certain conception of what politics is, who does it and where it takes place. The form through which a movement expresses itself contains a specific temporal and spatial conception of politics and if this gets out of sync with shifts in social relations then that mode of expression becomes redundant.

In fact doesn't this lead us to a real excess that has been created by the recent 'student' movement? Political activism has begun to escape its status as a specialist interest, bringing into question the who, where and how of 'history-making'. It is now quite legitimate, across new sections of society, to think politically and to act

collectively. There is a new level of intensity to the struggle, with weekly protests accelerating the movement's collective learning. The movement needs to express this new reality in ways that allow it to keep moving.

Of course it's not always obvious which function will be turned to expression. It seems likely though that the best mode of expression will be a form of action that will simultaneously act as an expression of our power. Perhaps by prefiguring the sort of change that we are anticipating – e.g. Rosa Parks who sparked a struggle against segregation on US public transport by enacting the world she wished to see and simply sitting in the wrong part of the bus. Or perhaps it will be a form of acting that shows how the reforms and cuts rely on our cooperation to implement – e.g. the Poll Tax non-payment campaign or the Italian auto-riduzione () movement in the 1970s.

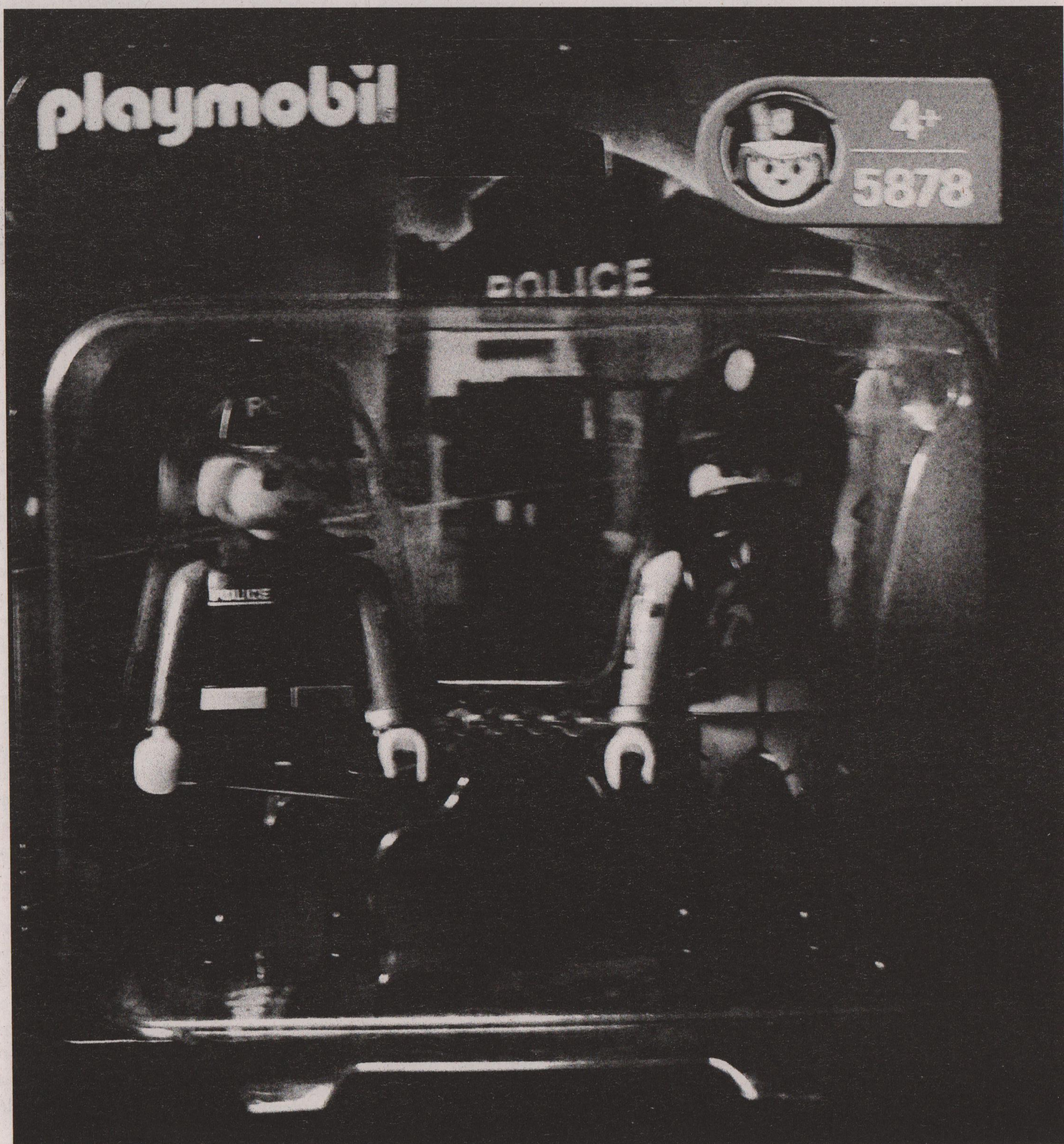
The urgent task at hand is to ask what form of expression we can forge that will tip this over from a defence of the present to a general movement that controls the future. What is it that will allow not just 'student' uprisings to resonate together, but for this to overflow into all sectors of society – precisely so that these 'sectors' are no longer perceptible (neither students, nor workers, nor mothers, nor the poor, nor the middle class etc.)? What steps do we need to take to move this from an 'interest group' contesting a narrow issue to the generalised desire of people acting as authors, participating in the collective writing of many histories?

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## Notes:

(1) See [http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-1/walking-in-the-right-direction/\\_2](http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-1/walking-in-the-right-direction/_2)

(2) See [http://libcom.org/history/autoreduction-movements-turin-1974\\_](http://libcom.org/history/autoreduction-movements-turin-1974_)





# a talk to the anarchist bookfair

## I

I want to start with a quotation from a Socialist Workers Party poster that I saw on the way to the Anarchist Bookfair. It said: 'Fight Back the Wrecking Tory Cuts'. There is no doubt that the cuts have to be rejected and will be opposed; society will try to protect itself from misery. 'Fight Back the Wrecking Tory Cuts' says something disarmingly obvious, and yet there is more to it than it seems. What does 'fight back the cuts' entail as a positive demand? It says no to cuts, and thus demands a capitalism not of cuts but of redistribution from capital to labour; it demands a capitalism that creates jobs not for capitalist profit but for gainful and purposeful employment, its premise is a capitalism that supports conditions not of exploitation but of well-being, and it projects a capitalism that offers fair wages ostensibly for a fair day's work, grants equality of conditions, etc. What a wonderful capitalism that would be! One is reminded of Marx' judgment when dealing with the socialist demand for a state that renders capital profitable without ostensibly exploiting the workers: poor dogs they want to treat you as humans!

nevolent capitalism in short, is of course as old as capitalism itself. In our time, this idea is connected with the so-called global financial capitalism that came to the fore in the 1970s. At that time, Bill Warren, for example, argued that all that needed to be done was to change the balance of power, of class power, to achieve, as it were, a socialist hegemony within capitalism – a strangely comforting idea, which presupposes that the hegemony of capital within capitalism is contingent upon the balance of class forces and thus changeable – ostensibly in favour of a socialist capitalism achieved by socialist majorities in parliament making capitalism socialist through law and parliamentary decisions. What an easy thing socialism is! All one has to do is vote for the right party, shift the balance of forces in favour of socialism, and enact the right laws. With the left enjoying hegemony, the state becomes a means to govern over capital, or as Warren saw it, to make money work, not for profit but for jobs, for wages, for welfare. This argument makes it seem as if money only dissociated itself from productive engagement because of a certain change in the balance of class forces. And the crisis of accumulation that began in the late 1960s – what do we make of this?

This idea of a capitalism without cuts, a be-

In the 1980s Austin Mitchell demanded the same thing in his book 'Market Socialism'. He says 'we need a state who will make money its servant, so that it is put to work for growth and jobs, rather than the selfish purposes of the merchants of greed.' Later this became a demand of the anti-globalisation movement, from economists such as Joseph Stiglitz to proponents of the Tobin Tax, from journalists such as Naomi Klein, who wanted "no logo", to political economists such as Leo Panitch who wanted the state to de-commodify social relations by putting money to work on behalf of workers within protected national economies – protected from the world market.

In the last 20 years 'fighting back finance capitalism' was a rallying cry for those who declared to make money create jobs, conditions, employment, that is, to create – in other words – the capitalism of jobs, of employment, of conditions.

Within the critical Marxist tradition, this sort of position is associated with the social-democratic conception of the state. This conception focuses on the way in which social wealth is distributed. It has little to say about the production of that

wealth, other than that the labourer should receive fair wages for a fair day's work. The perspective does not take into account the way in which we as a society organise our social reproduction; the question of the economic form of our exchange with nature is seen as a matter of benevolent state intervention.

This separation between production and distribution presupposes something that is not taken into account: distribution presupposes production. Distribution presupposes a well-functioning, growing economy, that is, capitalist accumulation. So the social-democratic position, which I outlined earlier with Panitch, Bill Warren and others, including the SWP, in fact translates working-class demands – for conditions, for wages, for security, in some cases for life – into the demand for rapid capitalist accumulation, as the economic basis for job creation.

Let's talk about the working-class, this class of 'hands' that does the work. Does the critique of class society entail an affirmative conception of class, which says that the working class deserves a better deal – employment, wages, conditions. Is class really an affirmative category? Or is it a critical category of a false society – a class society in which wealth is produced by a 'class of hands' that have nothing but their labour-power to sell? To be a productive labourer is not a piece of luck, it is a great misfortune. The critique of class does not find its resolution in a better paid and better employed working class. It finds its resolution only in a classless society.

Class analysis is not some sort of flag-waving on behalf of the working-class. Such analysis is premised on the perpetuation of the worker as seller of labour power, which is the very condition of the existence of capitalist social relations. Affirmative conceptions of class, however well-meaning and benevolent in their intentions, presuppose the working-class as a productive factor of production that deserves a better, a new deal.

As I stated right at the start, it is obviously the case that the more the working class gets, the better. For it is the working class that produces the wealth of nations. It is the class that works. Yet, what is a fair

wage?

In Volume III of 'Capital' Marx says something like this: 'price of labour is just like a yellow logarithm'. Political economy in other words is indeed a very scholarly dispute about how the booty of labour may be divided, or distributed. Who gets what? Who bears the cuts? Who produces capitalist wealth, and what are the social presuppositions and consequences of the capitalist organisation of the social relations of production, an organisation that without fail accumulates great wealth for the class that hires workers to do the work.

## II

I want to step back a bit to 1993, just after the deep recession of the early 1990s and the second of the two European currency crises. It was on 24 December 1993 that the Financial Times announced that globalisation – a term which hardly had any currency up until then – is the best wealth-creating system ever invented by mankind. And it said, unfortunately two thirds of the world's population gained little or no substantial advantage from rapid economic growth.

## “Class analysis is not some sort of flag-waving on behalf of the working-class.”

In the developed world the lowest quarter of income earners had witnessed a trickle up rather than a trickle down. So since the mid 1970s – and Warren picks up on this – we have a system where money, the incarnation of wealth, is invested, incestuously as it were, into itself, opening a huge gap, a dissociation between an ever receding though in absolute terms growing productive base. This created something akin to an upside down pyramid where a great and ever increasing mortgage, an ever greater and ever increasing claim on future surplus value accumulated – mortgaging the future exploitation of labour. This mort-

gage tends to become fictitious at some point when investor confidence disappears – when, in other words, the exploitation of labour in the present does not keep up with the promise of future extraction of value.

It is against this background that Martin Wolf argued in 2001 'what is needed is honest and organised coercive force'. He said that in relationship to the developing world. And Martin Wolf is right – from his perspective. In order to guarantee debt, in order to guarantee money, coercion is the means to render austerity effective. Or as Soros said in 2003: 'Terrorism provided not only the ideal legitimisation but also the ideal enemy for the unfettered coercive protection of a debt ridden free market society', because, he says, 'it is invisible and never disappears'.

So the premise of a politics of austerity is in fact the ongoing accumulation of humans on the pyramid of capitalist accumulation. Its blind eagerness for plunder requires organised coercive force in order to sustain this huge mortgage, this huge promise of future exploitation, here in the present.

Martin Wolf's demand for the strong state does not belie neo-liberalism, which is wrongly caricatured as endorsing the weak and ineffectual state. Neo-liberalism does not demand weakness from the state. 'Laissez faire', said the late Sir Alan Peacock, formerly a Professor of Economics, 'is no answer to riots'.

'Law', says Carl Schmitt, the legal philosopher of Nazism, 'does not apply to chaos.' For law to apply order must exist. Law presupposes order. Order is not the consequence of law. Law is effective only on the basis of order. And that is as Hayek put it in the 'Road to Serfdom': 'Laissez faire is a highly ambiguous and misleading description of the principles on which a liberal policy is based.' 'The neo-liberal state', he says, 'is a planner too, it is a planner for competition'. Market freedom in other words requires the market police, that is the state, for its protection and maintenance.

Capitalist social relations, Schmitt claims, are protected by an enlightened state, and



in times of crisis a more or less authoritarian direction becomes unavoidable. Chaos and disorder create the state of emergency which call for the establishment of a strong, market facilitating, order making state. The state is the political form of the force of law - of law making violence.

For the neo-liberals, disorder has nothing to do with markets. It is to do with what they perceive as irrational social action. That is, they see the democratisation or politicisation of social labour relations as a means of disorder, it undermines markets and renders state ungovernable. The state, however - argue the neo-liberal authors - has to govern to maintain order, and with it, the rule of law, the relations of exchange, the law of contract. Free markets function on the basis of order; and order, they argue, entails an ordered society; and an ordered society is not a society that is politicised, but one which is in fact governed - by the democracy of demand and supply, which only the strong state is able to facilitate, maintain, and protect.

### III

What is the alternative?

I think the difficulty of conceiving of human self-emancipation has to do with the very idea of human emancipation. This idea is distinct from the pursuit of profit, the seizure of the state, the pursuit and preservation of political power, economic value and economic resource. It follows a completely different idea of human development - and it is this, which makes it so very difficult to conceive, especially in a time of 'cuts'. One cannot think, it seems, about anything else but 'cuts, cuts, cuts'. Our language, which a few years ago spoke of the Paris Commune, the Zapatistas, Council Communism, and the project of self-emancipation that these terms summoned, has been replaced by the language of cuts, and fight back, and bonuses, and unfairness, etc. And then suddenly, imperceptibly it seems, this idea of human emancipation - in opposition to a life compelled to be lived for the benefit of somebody's profit, a life akin to an economic resource - gives way to the very reality that it seeks to change and from which it cannot get away - a reality of government cuts and of opposition against cuts. Government governs those who oppose it.

Human emancipation is however not a derivative of capitalist society - it is its alternative, yet, as such an alternative, it is premised on what it seeks to transcend. The SWP poster, with which I started, focuses this premise as an all-embracing reality - cuts or no cuts, that is the question.

What is the alternative? Let us ask the question of capitalism differently, not as a question of cuts but as a question of labour-time. How much labour time was needed in 2010 to produce the same amount of commodities as was produced 1990? 50 percent? 30 percent? 20 percent? Whatever the percentage might be, what is certain is that labour time has not decreased. It has increased. What is certain, too, is that despite this increase in wealth, the dependent masses are subjected to a politics of austerity as if famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence. What a calamity: In the midst of 'austerity', this rational means to perpetuate an irrational mode of production, in which the reduction of the hours of labour needed for the production of the means of subsistence appears in reality as a crisis of finance, money and cash, the struggle over the appropriation of additional atoms of labour time persists as if the reduction of the life-time of the worker to labour time is the resolution to the crisis of debt, finance, and cash flow. Indeed it is. Time is money. And if time really is money, then man is nothing - except a time's carcass.

And here, in this calamity, there is hope. The hope is that the struggle against cuts, is also a struggle for something.

What does the fight against cuts entail? It is a struggle against the reduction of life time to labour time. The fight against cuts is in fact a fight for a life. For the dependent masses, wages and welfare benefits are the means with which to obtain the means of subsistence. The fight against the cuts is a fight for the provision of the means of subsistence. And that is, it is a conflict between antagonistic interests, one determining that time is money, the other demanding the means of subsistence. This demand, as I argued at the start, might well express itself uncritically as a demand for a politics of jobs and wages, affirming the need for rapid accumulation as the means of job-creation. It might

not. It might in fact politicise the social labour relations, leading to the question why the development of the productive forces at the disposal of society have become too powerful for this society, bringing financial disorder and requiring austerity to maintain it. Such politicisation, if indeed it is to come about, might well express, in its own words, Jacques Roux's dictum that 'freedom is a hollow delusion for as long as one class of humans can starve another with impunity. Equality is a hollow delusion for as long as the rich exercise the right to decide over the life and death of others.'

Editorial Note: The talk develops some insights from the 'Communist Manifesto', and is loosely based on the following publications by Bonefeld:

'Anti-Globalization and the Question of Socialism', Critique. Journal of Socialist Thought, no. 38, 2006, pp. 39-59.

'Free Economy and the Strong State', Capital and Class, vol. 34 no. 1, 2010, pp. 15-24.

'Global Capital, National State, and the International', Critique. Journal of Socialist Thought, no. 44, 2008, pp. 63-72.

'History and Human Emancipation', Critique. Journal of Socialist Thought, vol. 38, no. 1, 2010, pp. 61-73.

Werner Bonefeld is Professor of Politics at the University of York. He recently published 'Subverting the Present - Imagining the Future' with Autonomedia.

# what next?

Issue 12 of Shift Magazine will be published in May 2012. If you have an article idea, please get in touch. We are especially interested in continuing discussions started in this issue about the anti-cuts protests.

Thank you,

Shift Editors.

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