SOLIDARITY

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Tienanmen Square

A week is a long time in British indignation

Guy Aldred

From boy-preacher to socialist impossibilist

Great War Shame

If I should die by firing squad, remember this of me

SOLIDARITY JOURNAL 22/23

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SOLIDARITY is also the imprint of a series of pamphlets and books which now numbers more than sixty titles; and which have been variously translated into fifteen foreign languages. A list of those currently in print appears elsewhere in this issue.

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COVER PICTURE: Chinese students take on the People's Army in the battle for Tienanmen Square, the night of June 3/4 1989. Photo: Bob Gannon

ANALYSIS

TIENANMEN SQUARE

Trading with China is thicker than blood

Bob Gannon

At dusk on June 3, soldiers of the People's Army swarm into position for the assault on Tienanmen Square. As yet unaware of the task ahead, within a few hours they will kill ten hundred Chinese of their own age. Outraged Western nations responded by freezing diplomatic and trade activity with Beijing. Or did they? MILAN RAI examines Britain's record in the weeks that followed, and discovers behind the convenient smokescreen of concern for the rights of Hong Kong's elite that it has been business as usual with China's student-murderers.

THE MASSACRE IN BEIJING presented the Western media with a delicate problem. The presence of the world's press meant that the killings could not be hushed up, as is usual when a Western client engages in brutality. The silence over state terrorism in El Salvador is a recent notable example. In the case of the June 4 slaughter the outrage was unavoidable; the task was to condemn the Beijing authorities while simultaneously defending continued relations with China. The Chinese mass media, in contrast, had the less taxing task of simply erasing the bloodbath from history. This effort was greeted with horror in the West. The Guardian devoted an editorial to the subject (June 10), praising the "[dozens] of brave reporters from the West and beyond [who] have done their best this week, and brilliantly so", while "China has been handed a sick perversion of the truth". It is a staple of Western ideology that while the Communist press serves the State, the Western mass media are independent of established power, searching only for the truth. A careful study of the record will demolish this fantasy. The reporting of recent events in China provides examples of a systematic bias towards vested interests.

Before the bloodshed, commentators had given powerful support to Western business interests, while reporting the dissident movement, by ascribing the uprising to the "gap between the swift pace of economic reform and the sluggishness of political reform", in the words of a Guardian editorial (May 20). The assumption, held across the mainstream of opinion, that the two sets of policies were fundamentally linked was expressed in the common concept of "reform". The meaning of this technical term was occasionally expressed bluntly. The Guardian, for example, declared on the day after the massacre, "we assumed... that the business culture, the Americans with their chequebooks, would inevitably bring some form of democracy in their wake."

The Independent, in an editorial before the crackdown (May 18), acknowledged that the students claimed to be "within the mainstream of communism". However, the people's demands for democracy and consumer goods "can soon become, effectively, demands for a capitalist society, the only system which can provide both over any length of time." This may conceivably be true, but in the absence of an argument we are entitled to some scepticism, as Chomsky would say. Note the cynical use of the Chinese dissidents to shore up capitalist ideology, despite the admission that the students were demanding only a reformed Communism.

Open propaganda such as this is relatively rare, however. By using Newspeak terms like 'reform', one can create the impression that certain ideas are so well established that they are beyond question. In this way, the 'free press' insinuates capitalist ideology into the language of debate. The goal is not to dictate exactly what must be thought, as in Chinese society, but to set the boundaries of what it is possible to think.

The main focus of media attention was on the struggle within the Chinese Communist Party between 'reformers' and 'hardliners', two more propaganda terms. The former, led by the party secretary Zhao Ziyang, a "relatively liberal" politician, according to the Guardian, were identified with the cause of the students. The latter were portrayed as 'conservative' backward-looking Communists. While there was a basis for these distinctions, this was a seriously distorted view of the leadership. For example, the democracy movement was "anything but a pro-Zhao campaign" according to Andrew Higgins, the Independent's correspondent in Beijing. The reasons for this are not obscure; one of the grievances of the democracy movement was

official corruption, and Zhao's sons were considered among the worst cases of nepotism.

More importantly, another major grievance was inflation. The further deregulation of prices advocated by Zhao in 1987 led to the doubling of inflation in the first half of 1988 to 14%, and a further increase to perhaps 30% in the first half of 1989. The policies of the reformists are themselves one of the sources of public discontent, another reason why Zhao might not be overwhelmingly popular. This awkward fact was largely ignored here. Zhao's elevation into a liberal Western hero (like Deng's earlier popularity) is due not to his concern for the welfare of the people, but rather to his zeal in catering to Western business.

After Tienanmen Square the question of Britain's response became a matter of public concern. The massacre ignited a fierce debate over the question of Hong Kong, which is due to be returned to China in 1997. In contrast, the issue of sanctions against China was virtually ignored. Within the debate over Hong Kong, the question of democracy in the colony was similarly marginalised.

The Government, supported by the Labour Party and the Guardian, proposes to allow only elite personnel and the wealthy to escape to Britain. The Independent spearheaded opposition, urging that the 3.25 million people in Hong Kong who hold 'British Dependent Territories' passports should be given the right of abode. There has been no significant support for what seems to be a popular proposal in Hong Kong, namely that all 5.7 million people living in the colony should be given the right of abode. Both sides in the British debate tacitly agree that the right of abode issue should be decided unilaterally by the UK, and without regard to "the wishes of the islanders".

While public debate over the fate of Hong Kong is long overdue, it is extraordinary that the problems of the colony were used to eclipse the question of sanctions, one of the main demands of Chinese dissidents both on the mainland and in Hong Kong. After June 4, Margaret Thatcher expressed her "utter revulsion and outrage", and agreed that "normal business with the Chinese authorities cannot continue". The then Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe announced a package of four largely cosmetic sanctions. Ministerial exchanges and high level military contacts were "suspended". Arms sales were banned. The Royal Tour of China, scheduled for November, was not called off - it would not take place "so long as those responsible for the atrocities remained in control of the Chinese Government", an ambiguous formula.

There were flickerings of interest in sanctions question. The Foreign Office was asked why Britain maintained its diplomatic ties with China. "This is just the moment when we need our people there", replied an official. As a mark of respect for the victims, the UK would maintain friendly relations with their murderers. This decision was passed over in silence by the press, as was the decision to permit the Chinese Vice-Minister of Textiles, Du Juezhou, to enter Britain on a company invitation, reported only in the June issue of China-Britain Trade Review to our knowledge. This publication told us later they had no recollection of the item. When pressed they admitted the visit had been organised by the 48 Group but claimed not to know which British company Du Juezhou had visited. The 48 Group refused to discuss the matter and slammed down the phone.

The attitude of the press was summed up by the Independent (June 22); sanctions are "pointless". Indeed they are unnecessary. Enlightened self-interest will lead corporations to turn to other developing countries, which may

"more safely absorb investors' funds". After "a decent interval", it may be possible to resume some involvement in development projects.

By the time this editorial was published, it was already clear that enlightened self-interest had mysteriously failed to coincide with moral feeling. A senior executive with "extensive China trading experience" explained, "I am shocked, horrified and disgusted by recent events, but can ironically see advantages from my own company's point of view. No longer will the Chinese be able to play one party off against another with the argument that everyone is eager to beat a path to their door".

As for the idea of a "decent interval", business leaders had already adopted this policy without the help of the Independent. Trade exhibitions scheduled to take place in China in June and September were called off in the days after June 4, but an extraordinary trade mission by the 48 Group tabled for October was merely put on ice. This trip was to finalise details on a £3 billion trade deal announced in May by the president of the Confederation of British Industry, Trevor Holdsworth, and was the best opportunity for Britain to impose sanctions, since it is financed by a UK Government 'soft loan'.

A month after Tienanmen Square, the 48 Group announced that the mission was to proceed. "We don't want to serve the propaganda purposes of the Chinese government" said Percy Timberlake, a consultant to the group, on 5 July, "but if British businessmen are not there, they would simply find other businessmen". If the Government advised against it, however, the group would reconsider. For its part, the Department of Trade and Industry announced that it would not withdraw support from a trade promotion arranged before June 4. This is hardly refusing to carry on normal business with China. The Government has rendered one valuable public service; it has defined fairly exactly the decent interval before we can overlook a large-scale bloodbath in a friendly country: approximately four and a half months.

That is the decent interval for high-profile normal business, of course. The decent interval for ordinary normal business is somewhat less. Thus two Davy Corporation representatives remained in Beijing during the slaughter to complete a million dollar fertilizer deal with a Chinese construction company. This was a unique performance among British representatives. Typically they tended to leave China for a week before returning. According to the China-Britain Trade Review, (July), "virtually all of the British companies with representative offices in Beijing have now [the beginning of July] sent their staff back", information which excited little press comment.

When the return of British business was reported, a device was used to distract attention from the facts. The focus of a typical article by the Independent's reporter on the spot Tony Allen-Mills (June 24) was the showing of a British representative doing business in China on the Chinese evening news. The "commentator proudly reminded viewers that China's relations with the West continue to thrive... But later the businessman told a different story". His version, hardly a different story, was that had not expected the meeting to be filmed.

Allen-Mills does not question the British representative's surprise at being filmed, yet in the same article explains that this has become routine since the massacre. This policy is not without risks for the Chinese Government; fear of being used in a propaganda exercise might deter some firms. As one US representative put it, "What's the point of getting $30 million worth

of bad publicity for $5 million worth of business?".

The point of taking the risk was laid out by a British business-person in the article already quoted. He had "returned... out of a sense of loyalty to his Chinese partners, who could hardly be held responsible for the murderous assault on protesting students". This representative told Allen-Mills, "We have to balance two decades of contacts with our business partners against the possibility we will be used for propaganda purposes" (by people who can be held responsible for the said murderous assault). Fortunately, as long as the British press remains obedient, and effectively conceals the spectacle of Western corporations flocking to exploit the massacre for commercial gain, bad publicity is unlikely to cost around $30 million in any case.

The events in Tienanmen Square were often reported "brilliantly" by "brave reporters", sometimes at the risk of their own lives. However, the framework of assumptions which they and their colleagues in London adopted ensured that the goals of the Chinese dissidents were misrepresented, and after June 4 their sacrifices were swiftly forgotten. The Chinese people are not the only ones to have been handed "a sick perversion of the truth". The liberal press has played a particularly valuable role in supporting the State, because of its pose as an adversary of vested interests.

It appears, to our shame, that business elites and the Government have calculated correctly. Both the Government and private enterprise have been able to resume "normal business" with China after a startlingly brief "decent interval". China is well on the way to returning to the ranks of the civilized world, to take its place alongside Turkey, El Salvador and Indonesia. After all, it does not matter whether a cat is black or white, so long as it pays cash.

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TIENANMEN SQUARE

Waiting for the old guard to die

CHEN ENLAI, a low-ranking official of the Chinese government, talks frankly to TOM BURNS about the student occupation of Tienanmen Square at the end of May, its suppression on June 4, and the aftermath.

SOLIDARITY: How did you become aware that there was a demonstration in Tienanmen Square?

CHEN ENLAI: I work not far from the Square so I knew from the start. The street was soon so crowded it was impossible for me to get through on my bicycle.

SOLIDARITY: Do you think that all the people in the Square supported the students?

CHEN: Chinese people are very curious. If there is a fight in the street very quickly there will be people standing round with arms folded watching. I think most of the people went to see what was happening. Of course there were plainclothes policemen as well. The main demand on the banners was for the abolition of privileges for senior government officials. They have the use of foreign cars, for example. My boss had a Mercedes. Not to own, of course, but to use. Now privileges have been abolished. Senior officials now have to use Chinese cars.

SOLIDARITY: Did you see anything of the clearing of the Square?

CHEN: No. It happened at 2.00 am. I went home after work the day before. When I came back the next morning there was no-one left. All the people had been taken away, except for one body, which the soldiers left lying in the street, as a warning of what would happen to people if they went back.

SOLIDARITY: Why do you think the massacre happened?

CHEN: When Gorbachev came to Beijing he was unable to get into the Great Hall of the People through the front entrance because of the people in the Square and had to sneak in by a rear entrance. Deng Xiaoping lost a great deal of face and I think the killings were to get revenge and show that he was still in charge.

SOLIDARITY: What is Deng's official position now? He isn't General Secretary of the Party.

CHEN: He is the Chairman of the Military Commission. That means he controls the army, which is the ultimate source of power in China. He has given up his other positions but kept the most important of all.

SOLIDARITY: How much do people know about what happened?

CHEN: People in the east and west of Beijing know about it, because those were the directions that the army came in from. The people in

the north and south know less. Outside Beijing I don't think they know very much at all. The general standard of eduction in China is very low. I think people believe what they read in the newspaper or see on television. I would like to be able to get a video of the foreign news coverage.

SOLIDARITY: Were you involved in the Cultural Revolution?

CHEN: No. I was too young. My brother was a Red Guard, but he wasn't involved in the violence, just in general disruption.

SOLIDARITY: I heard that the government is 're-educating' people who had contact with foreigners.

CHEN: Well, the tourist industry has collapsed. They are giving political education to tourist guides and so on, to give them something to do.

SOLIDARITY: What does it involve?

CHEN: They have to go to meetings and study the speeches of Deng and the Party members say what they think of them.

SOLIDARITY: Just Party members have to go?

CHEN: The others have to go, but it's only the Party members who have to speak.

SOLIDARITY: Do they study Marx and Lenin as well?

CHEN: No, we don't read them at all.

SOLIDARITY: Are you a member of the Party?

CHEN: No. When I first started working for the government I thought promotion would come on merit. After a few years I realised that to get above a certain level you had to be a Party member. I don't want to work for the government any more. I would like to leave China. But it is very difficult. I have my family. If I was sent abroad they would not be able to come with me.

SOLIDARITY: Do many people in the Party still believe in socialism?

CHEN: Perhaps half of them.

SOLIDARITY: What happens to people who are politically suspect?

CHEN: They get bad reports on their files. If I got into trouble it would be very hard for me to get a decent job.

SOLIDARITY: Do workers in China have a job record? In the Soviet Union every worker has a book which contains details of their work record and it goes with them from job to job.

CHEN: I didn't know that. We don't have that in China. But everyone has their own file kept on them.

SOLIDARITY: How do you see the future?

CHEN: I expect we will have to wait until the old men like Deng die before we see changes, like they had to in the Soviet Union.

SOLIDARITY: I can give you a copy of the letter which Amnesty International sent to the Chinese government in April about its use of the death penalty, and some information about the people arrested after the Tianamen Square killings.

CHEN: Amnesty International [laughing]. The government really hates this organisation!

● For obvious reasons the name CHEN ENLAI is a pseudonym.

INTERVIEW

MILITARY DISCIPLINE

But he did for them all with his scratch rifle squads

Every five days for 222 weeks the British Army shot one of its own side. Not accidentally, the result of First World War confusion; but judicially, in cold blood, by firing squad, for the sake of example. Seventy years later the Ministry of Defence still refuses to disclose which men suffered this roughest of rough justice. Now two independent researchers have succeeded in compiling the names of these hapless Tommies. RICHARD SCHOFIELD and JULIAN PUTKOWSKI report on an unusually shabby aspect of the Great War.

MANY ASPECTS of that hellish affair the First World War remain unexplored - including the circumstances that led to the execution of 350 or so British soldiers at the hands of their own comrades.

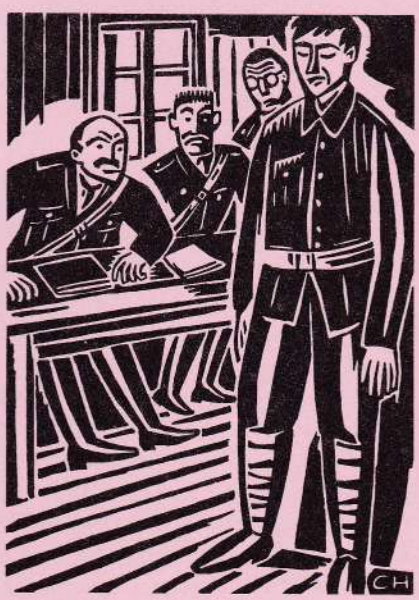
Even after seventy years the Ministry of Defence still refuses to disclose the full details about these cases, but even without access to official files it is possible to discover a good deal about soldiers shot under the the British Army Act. All these cases are chronicled for the first time in a book published this month.

Shot at Dawn by Julian Putkowski and Julian Sykes took over ten years to compile. With no access to secret Government records, they pieced together details from publicly available sources: old newspapers, war diaries, casualty and medal rolls. This task bypassed Official Secret Act concealment of what amounted to ritualised murder.

In social and class terms the abject roll-call revealed in Shot at Dawn is depressingly predictable. The firing squads' victims were overwhelmingly working class, often ill-educated and inarticulate, and owing to the stress of trench warfare frequently in poor health. Some families were never told that their sons had been tried and executed.

The Tommies who were killed by order of General Haig and his red-tabbed accomplices are no longer anonymous. The 'naming of names' also serves to condemn the hundreds of biographers whose efforts garlanded the generals and ignored the fields of rotting carcases on which their martial reputations were made. Politicians were useless at stemming the executions, and successive Cabinets have done nothing to secure redress for the dependants of those executed.

The case of Private Abraham Harris recounted on the next pages is relatively unexceptional example.



Cliff Harper

The Great War of Private Harris

IN AUGUST 1914 thousands of young working class lads from London's East End joined the British Army to fight the Kaiser. Mainly for political and religious reasons, proportionately fewer of the volunteers were recruited from the impoverished Jewish community around Whitechapel, but there were exceptions, including 18-year-old Aby (Abraham) Beverstein.

Possibly in order to avoid anti-semitic harrassment, Aby adopted his mother's family name, Harris, when he volunteered. He told neither parent what he had done until after he had enlisted, partly because soldiering was considered a disgraceful occupation by traditional Jews. He also omitted to fill in the documentation necessary to secure even the miniscule daily six pence Army allowance for his family.

After a few months' training at Aldershot, Private Abraham Harris, No. 11/1799, sailed from Folkestone to join the British Expeditionary Force in France. Serving with the 11th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, Aby soon lost his enthusiasm for fighting the Huns. On scraps of paper he pencilled letters to his family during the summer of 1915, chronicling his unhappiness, regret, and poverty. In addition to hating the morbid hell of trench warfare, Aby found that Army pay barely covered buying cigarettes and bread to supplement his rations. The hungry private was reduced to begging money from the meagre income his parents scraped from tailoring. On 10 July 1915, in a letter to his mother, the remorseful Aby scribbled,

"I know it is very hard for you to miss me from home, but still never mind, be happy and don't cry. I think you know I am very sorry I done that, but if I have luck I will come home".

Abraham Harris's luck held until the last week of December 1915, when his battalion shivered in the front line trenches at Givenchy, near Bethune. There was no Christmas truce at Givenchy for the men of the Middlesex Regiment. The enemy, tunnelling under no-man's-land, battered Harris's unit by exploding a huge underground charge, followed by a maelstrom of shellfire. A few days later there was a repeat performance, and more Tommies were slaughtered or buried alive as the trenches collapsed.

During the action Aby was badly wounded in the back. On 15 January 1916, the Infantry Record Office, Hounslow, sent a formal note to the Beversteins at 48 Anthony Street, Whitechapel: "I regret to inform you that 11/1799 Pte. Harris A,... is ill at 38th Field Ambulance, France, suffering from wounds and shock (mine explosion)".

A reassuring letter from the wife of Aby's commanding officer and more letters from their hospitalised son went some way to ease the family's emotional distress, but the soldier's respite from trench warfare was brief. Three weeks after he had been admitted to hospital, Aby was discharged as fit for another spell at the front. The bedridden and traumatised soldier's treatment would have been even briefer if his discharge had not been delayed by a pressure sore.

Early February 1916 found Aby detailed with his battalion holding the line opposite the infamous and bloody Hohenzollern Redoubt. On February 13 Aby left his comrades in the front line and wended his way rearward to his Company Headquarters. He reported to his Company Quatermaster Sergeant that a grenade had exploded near where he had been posted and his nerves had gone to pieces. The NCO ordered him to report to the unit's medical officer, who checked him and found nothing amiss. Private Harris was

ordered to return to his unit, and off he marched - away from the front line. He found a vacant French farmhouse where he kindled a fire to warm himself up. After a short while a passing officer, his curiosity aroused by the fire, strode up to the farmhouse and arrested Aby as a suspected deserter.

On February 23 Aby wrote to his long-suffering mother:

"We were in the trenches, and I was ill, so I went out and they took me to prison, and I am in a bit of trouble now and won't get any money for a long time. I will have to go in front of a Court. I will try my best to get out of it, so don't worry. But, dear Mother, try to send some money, not very much, but try your best...".

Aby was court-martialled on March 4. He pointed out to the court that after the grenade explosion his nerve had gone and he'd lost control of his senses. The officers who tried Aby did not believe his account, nor were they impressed by his otherwise unblemished service record. They sentenced him to death - a verdict endorsed by the senior officers subsequently charged with reviewing the sentence. If the officers who colluded in Aby's trial and sentence ever saw his medical record, it is hard not to conclude that they achieved a particular excellence in the callous craft of military-judicial murder.

Aby was not without company when he subsequently faced a British Army firing squad at Labourse. The levelled rifles also killed another soldier, Private Harry Martin of 9th Battalion, Essex Regiment, another convicted deserter reported to have otherwise been "of good character".

Aby and Harry had already been buried together when Lieutenant Colonel P G Hendley, in charge of Infantry Records at Hounslow, completed the requisite Army communication on 8 April 1916 and mailed it to Aby's family. It read:

"Sir, I am directed to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office to the effect that No. 11/1799. Pte. Harris A, 11th Battalion Middlesex Regiment G S, was sentenced after trial by Court Martial to suffer death by being shot for desertion, and the sentence was duly executed on 20th March, 1916".

Aby's pitiful story was originally chronicled by anti-war feminist Sylvia Pankhurst in the 22 April 1916 issue of Women's Dreadnought. She tried to secure compensation for Aby's parents, and two sympathetic MPs, Philip Snowden and R L Outhwaite, raised the issue of the execution of teenage soldiers in the House of Commons, to no avail (Hansard, 4 May 1916). Aby's age is a puzzle. Sylvia Pankhurst, quoting his mother's letter, stated he was 18 years 3 months. The Army insisted he was 21. There is some evidence that he may have been much younger - research in the GLC archives shows he may have been born on 10th June 1903, the son of Abraham and Rebecca Harris (born Rebecca Adordas and later deserted by her husband). If so, he would have been the youngest soldier to have successfully enlisted in the British Army in the twentieth century.

Aby Beverstein/Harris was the seventy-fourth British soldier to be executed after being court-martialled under the British Army Act - his death was followed by 268 others.

● Shot at Dawn: Executions in World War One by Authority of the British Army Act, by Julian Putowski and Julian Sykes, is published by Wharncliffe Publishing, price £15.95. The book gives full details of all soldiers executed by authority of the Act between August 1914 and November 1920.

DESIGN

Eric Gill sans politics

Fiona MacCarthy
Eric Gill
Faber & Faber, 1989. £17.50

IN BRITAIN IN THE 1980s, 'design' has become a key player in the struggle to modernize the country and its permanently ailing economy. For a few years, early on in the reign of Margaret Thatcher, design was quite often taken to be the magic ingredient that would sell British goods to the world. Or if we couldn't make things, at least we could sell the 'soft' skills of consultancy, marketing, advertising, styling. By now, a greater realism about this is apparent, but the association of design with exterior appearance and commercial lubrication has stuck - and come true. (Witness the global success of certain London design firms: Fitch, Michael Peters, Conran, being among the best known). This has meant a negation of the old idea of design, as the process of forming (not just styling) mass-produced goods - appropriately, usefully. The widely accepted view of this movement for socially useful design - one that still seems largely true - is that it originated in Britain in the last century (Ruskin, Morris, the Arts & Crafts Movement), to be taken up and developed, especially between the two world wars, by the Modern Movement on the European continent.

In this recent take-over of the idea of design, history has become a weapon. Thus the thesis expounded by Martin Wiener in English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit (published in 1981) - that the causes of Britain's failure lie in the anti-commercial ethos of its ruling classes - was seized on by Keith Joseph, at the time when he was the leading ideologue of the Conservative Party. It was reported that he circulated copies of this text among his colleagues. Quite soon, Wiener's thesis (which certainly has some truth in it) was taken over uncritically by design pundits. A frequently heard voice, that of Stephen Bayley (ex-director of Terence Conran's Design Museum, used Wiener's ideas in attacking William Morris. Bayley, for his own purpose of redefining design as entrepreneurial retail-aggression, represented Morris as a woolly, off-to-the-Cotswolds, sentimental socialist, living off inherited wealth. In this account, the radical, utopian-communist commitment of Morris was repressed, and the whole moral-human dimension of his work blindly passed over. (I sometimes try to imagine the effects of a reply by the non-woolly polemicist Morris to smart denigrators such as Bayley: they might feel compelled to retire in disgrace, perhaps to the Cotswolds).

Some such sketch of our present political context may not be without point in introducing a consideration of an artist-craftsworker of the generation after William Morris: Eric Gill (1882-1940). Though his importance is still hard to estimate, Gill was certainly a phenomenon. In just under 40 years he produced "over 100 figures or reliefs in stone; over 750 pieces of inscriptional lettering; half a dozen typefaces; 1,000 engravings; 300 pamphlets, articles and books". Of non-conformist (and missionary) up-bringing, he converted to Catholicism in his early 30s. Alongside this religious commitment, he ran through a sequence of political-philosophical attachments: arts-and-crafts back-to-the-landism, Fabianism, distributism, anarchism,

radical pacifism. Gill has various reputations: a minor figure in the history of English art, recently enjoying a modest revival, as modernist assumptions are questioned; a presence in the annals of between-the-wars politico-religious polemics; a major contributor to a bywater of cultural production - typography, and particularly typeface design.

Gill jumped to the notice of the British chattering classes in January of this year, with the publication of Fiona MacCarthy's biography. This text, with its TV and newspaper spin-offs, at once became a succes de scandale. At the time of writing this review, four months after the book's appearance, Eric Gill has been reprinted three times.

Though the clues had been obvious enough, in his visual production and in his writings (and in a previous study by Malcolm Yorke: (Eric Gill: Man of Flesh and Spirit), what we chiefly learn from this new biography is that Gill was obsessively preoccupied with sex. To put it simply, MacCarthy portrays him as, from the age of about 20, relentlessly concerned to fuck almost any woman whom he encountered. In part, this came to be bound up with the activity of drawing and carving the human form (which he took up only when around 28 years old). It is a common trait in male artists, and perhaps especially in sculptors. But in Gill's case, there is a darker aspect: that of patriarchal command over his close family - his wife and their daughters - and its multiple extensions (secretaries, models, wives of co-workers). He had long-lasting incestuous relations with at least two of his sisters, and engaged in sexual experiments with his daughters. The evidence for all this comes from Gill himself,

Hulton-Deutsch

Gill in the stonecarving workshop at Pigotts, his High Wycombe community, in 1940.

especially in the meticulous diaries and notebooks that he kept. In public, Gill proclaimed the beauty of the human body, of the divine naturalness of sexual intercourse between men and women, without artificial contraception. In private, he seems rather to have been a jealous obsessive.

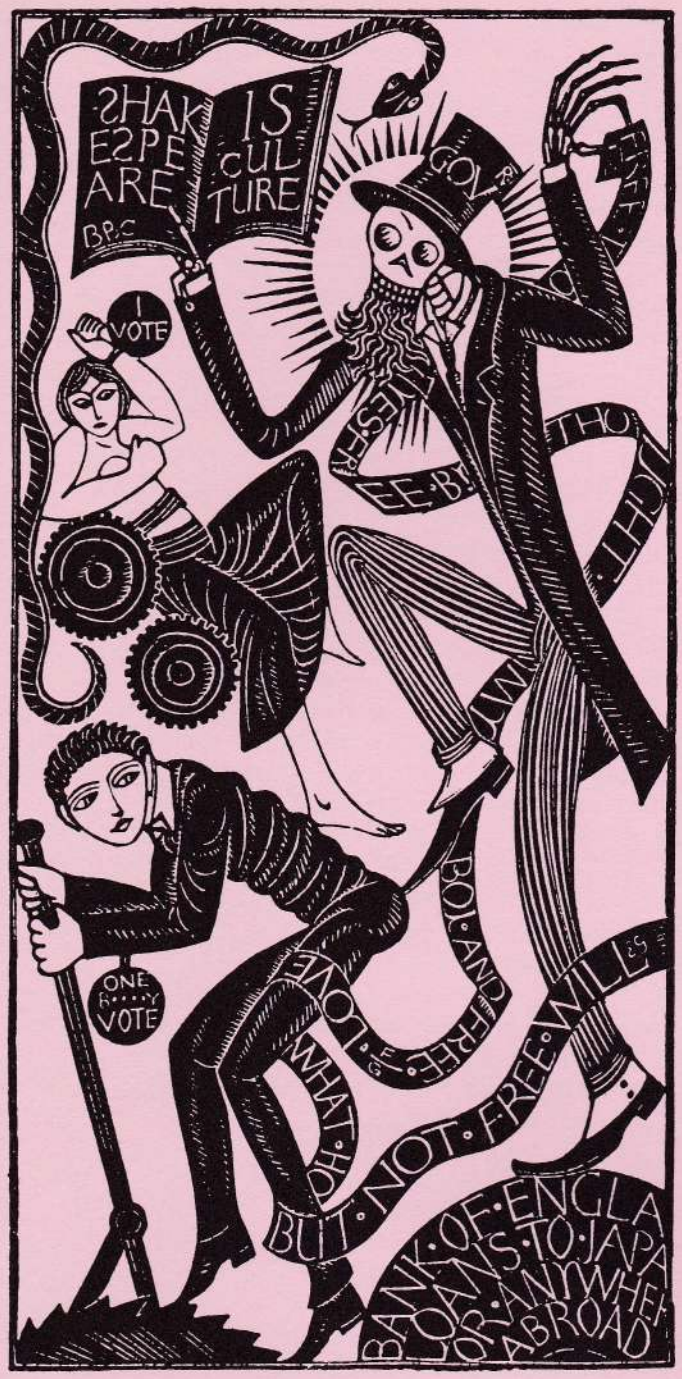
Fiona MacCarthy has come to this project from a background in design journalism (notably for the Guardian, in the 1960s). She made her name with All Things Bright and Beautiful (published in 1972): a chronicle of the movement for 'good design' in Britain, whose silly title accurately reflected a light-hearted and affectionately disparaging tone, in which nothing could be taken seriously. This text was revised and reissued in more utilitarian dress as A History of British Design (1979). Then as if warming up for the present book, she wrote The Simple Life. This was a study of C R Ashbee, another publicly high-minded and privately tortured artist-designer, whose work and socialist politics risk being lost sight of in the study of his homosexuality. That MacCarthy has begun research for a biography of the sexually-troubled socialist William Morris comes as no surprise.

As a woman, writing now about the essentially Victorian figure of Gill (who often just wanted things to be as they were in the Middle Ages), one might have expected MacCarthy to have been harder on him - or to have given up on such an exasperating character. But, on the contrary, one has the sense of some collusion between the author and her subject. In a Guardian article about the book, Christopher Driver (MacCarthy's former editor on that paper) reported that he "suspects she would have succumbed to her subject, if he were still around to pursue her". This may be trivial stuff, but it points to something of importance.

Gill's social-political attitudes did have a distinctly radical dimension. In the Autobiography that Gill wrote at the end of his life, there are some pages in which he describes his political formation, and his move away from Fabianism to a more revolutionary stance. In particular, he recalls the radicalizing experience of a demonstration in Trafalgar Square, in or around 1906, when he found himself in a police ambush:

> "We were not thus completely disillusioned as to parliamentary plutocracy in the year 1906 but we were moving in that direction and my experience in Whitehall... did a great deal towards establishing a different frame of mind with regard to the powers of those in power and the possibility of an unscrupulous use of them. It began to be clear that the hateful world of the man of business and its hateful cruelties would never be abolished by those who profited by them and that 'the mother of parliaments' was not an institution for righting wrongs (after all, it never had been) but one for the promotion and preservation of whatever seemed most profitable to owners of capital. And foreign politics was nothing but an extension of home politics on the same general principle".

One of the failures of Fiona MacCarthy's book is that, while briefly mentioning Gill's political engagement, she is unable to investigate it or to take it seriously. It is always on to the next carving, or the next mistress. To some extent - perhaps to a large extent - the biographer is here simply reflecting the reality of her subject. A full discussion of Gill's politics might well find that they remained stunted, too fleetingly and repetitively expressed. His political dissent became incorporated into the totality of his religious belief and it seems, at least to this observer, that this was a chief factor in curbing its development and coherent expression. Here one would have to examine



Victoria and Albert Museum

Gill's wood engraving for the frontispiece of his book 'The Lord's Song'. 1934.

the context in which Gill lived: the England of those years, its cultural-political apparatus, the possibilities open to him for discussion and publication. If his development was impeded, then what were the elements in the culture that blocked the way? What were the mechanisms that turned him and others (think of G B Shaw, for example) into celebrity-cranks, English Eccentrics.

This is the sense in which Fiona MacCarthy colludes with her subject, falling with him into the double-bed of biography. The single focus on an individual and his peculiarities means that the social and public world is diminished. Gill's sad condition, of being without an informing critical culture in art and design, continues fifty years after his death. Now, as the public realm contracts, politics is reduced to personality games and - there may be some connection - biography becomes a leading form in our very literary culture.

ROBIN KINROSS

LIBERTARIAN CLYDESIDE

The David Owen of the British far left

John Taylor Caldwell
Come Dungeons Dark
The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist
Luath Press, £6.95

Mark Shipway
Anti-Parliamentary Communism
The Movement for Workers' Councils in Britain, 1917-45
Macmillan, £20

GUY ALDRED was the David Owen of the British far left: a considerable intellect, an inspirational orator, who won the devotion, almost adulation, of a small band of followers, but who was incapable of working alongside anyone of similar stature and shrank into smaller and ever more peripheral movements. John Caldwell's biography of Aldred appears a quarter of a century after the death of its subject. He first met Guy Aldred in Glasgow in the early 1930s, just as

Aldred was breaking away from the small Clydeside-based anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation to establish the pathetically grand-sounding United Socialist Movement (USM).

Of the four mainstays of the USM, 'Caldie' is the only one still living. His admiration of Aldred is undimmed; he keeps cuttings, files and scrapbooks; he sometimes describes himself as the man who played monkey to Aldred's organ-grinder. In fact this biography, while certainly a flattering tribute to Aldred, is also testament to Caldwell's own tenacity and ability. Like Aldred himself, this book is honest and straightforward. It harks back to what Caldwell evocatively describes as the "period of proletarian meetings in austere halls of wooden benches and bare floors."

By far the greater part of the book dwells on the years before Guy Aldred, born in Clerkenwell in 1886, settled in Glasgow in 1920. There is no shortage of material about Aldred's early years. He made his first stab at autobiography in his early twenties with a tract entitled 'From Anglican Boy-Preacher to Anarchist Socialist Impossibilist' and subsequently made several attempts to set down the story of his life. Whatever can be said about Aldred, he did not hide his light under a bushel. He was always a prolific pamphleteer, and rarely without a journal to provide a forum for his ideas. Aldred's precocious political migration is a fascinating story - starting out from what is described as a "kind of social service democratic toryism", through advanced Radicalism, active membership of Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation, a brief dalliance with the SPGB and with the Freedom Group, and on to revolutionary syndicalism, all within the space of a few years.

He could never be described as a single-issue politician. At one time an advocate of revolutionary celibacy, he renounced this creed when he took up with Rose Witcop and in later years helped her in promoting awareness of birth control. He went to jail before the First World War for championing Indian Nationalism and a free press. Once war was declared, he was one of its most resolute opponents, enduring repeated court martials and detentions.

Why he settled in Glasgow is not entirely clear, though he was probably attracted by the temper of political activity in Clydeside. Here again his tremendous energy and self-assurance gained him an audience and a following. His frenetic programme of outdoor and indoor speaking, his imposing appearance and booming voice, his perpetual preference for knickerbockers, his quixotic candidacies for the council and for parliament, all earned him a place in Glasgow lore. He was not simply an eccentric. Although his publishing activities were never paying propositions, his writings were widely read on Clydeside. Even today, older figures in the Glasgow labour movement will recall Guy Aldred, and while they may disparage his ideas, as like as not they will acknowledge his sincerity and courage.

Caldwell's biography, distilled from a much longer unpublished work, captures Aldred's vitality, and also the frustration of his later years, when he was no longer a figure of real importance even in the Clydeside far left. He has little to say, however, about Aldred's financial dealings with Sir Walter Strickland and with the Duke of Bedford.

Guy Aldred gets pride of place in Mark Shipway's erudite book about anti-parliamentary communists between the wars, but he too makes only brief reference to Aldred's links with the Duke of Bedford. It is also disappointing that Shipway says little about the influence of Aldred outside Glasgow, about the size of the USM, or about the sales of Aldred's journals.

Where Mark Shipway succeeds is in illuminating the changing political fortunes and outlook of the anarchist-inclined movements on Clydeside. It is intriguing to realise that as late as 1924, Guy Aldred was discounting suggestions of political repression in Soviet Russia, and that on the outbreak of the Spanish civil war the various anti-parliamentary groups in Glasgow emphasised the legitimacy of the Republican government in Madrid and said little about the revolutionary aspirations of the Spanish people. It is a pity the book does not consider anarchist groups outside the Glasgow area. Do they fail some political litmus test, or are they simply unworthy of note?

Apart from Aldred and Clydeside, the other focus of Shipway's study is the group known at one time as the Workers' Socialist Federation gathered round Sylvia Pankhurst and the Workers' Dreadnought. Pankhurst chose not to join the CPGB on its foundation in 1920. But at the beginning of the following year her group teamed up with the Communist Party (while the Glasgow Communist Group, previously the Glasgow Anarchist Group, established the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation). Within a few months Sylvia Pankhurst was expelled from the CPGB, and the Dreadnought group was the biggest of the Left Communist groups to remain aloof, though the paper folded in June 1924.

Shipway's detailed account of the way these Left Communists resisted the very considerable international pressure for Communist unity is by far the best part of the book. He discusses their opposition to what the Bolshevists described as revolutionary parliamentarianism, and their rejection of Communist affiliation to the Labour Party. He also charts the changing attitudes to the Soviet Union with the turn away from War Communism in 1921.

Mark Shipway eschews scholarly detachment and is often openly judgmental about the movements on which he writes. His concluding sentence offers a telling contrast to that of John Caldwell's biography. Shipway, having lauded the anti-parliamentarians for "helping to sustain a genuinely revolutionary tradition in Britain", proclaims that "it is up to the working-class people of the world to take up the ideas put forward by the anti-parliamentary communists, and destroy capitalism before it destroys us."

John Caldwell, who has spent most of his life peddling that very line, recalls how he nursed all three of his close comrades through their final illnesses: "I am the last of the quartet. My despair has little depth, for despair can arise only from faith and hope".

SAM TOLLADY

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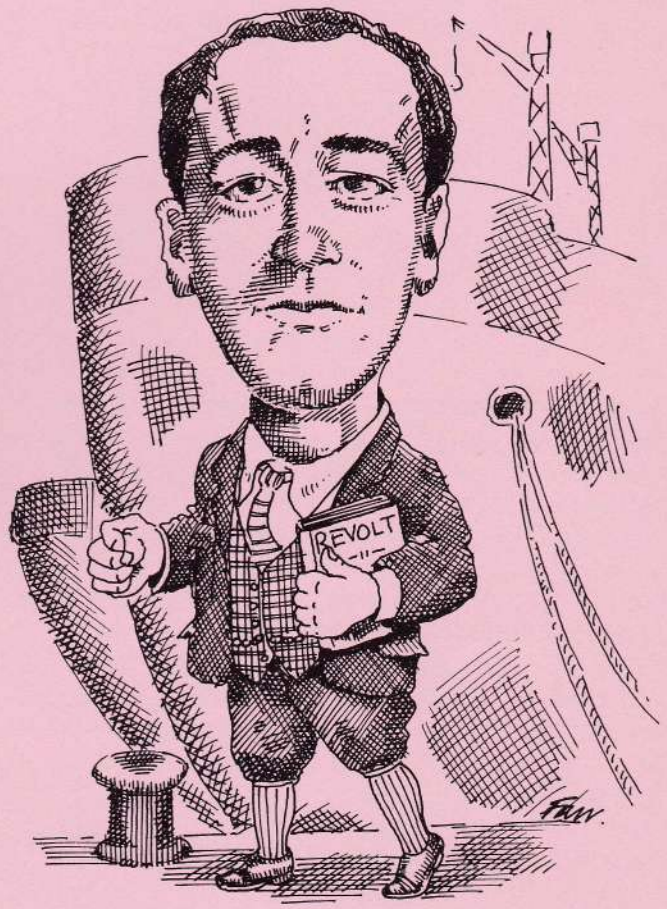

Simon Farr

GUY ALDRED: Sincere and courageous

THE SATANIC VERSES AFFAIR

Less than a great historical service

From ALISON WEIR, London:

In an extremely diffuse and ill-thought-out article ('Who is Afraid of Satan?', Solidarity, Autumn 1989), 'A El-Noor' purports to address the possibility that Salman Rushdie has "set off a chain reaction of cultural criticism of religion in Islamic countries". In addition, Rushdie's The Satanic Verses has apparently "rendered Islamic civilisation a great historical service". A El-Noor clearly wishes the Islamic countries well, and by 'well' he means that they should accommodate their need for scientific knowledge and technological expertise within the framework of Islam, or else abandon Islam. Not a very helpful or illuminating suggestion, if I may say so.

He cunningly opens the piece with a reference to the great damage done upon the world by the catholic Church's refusal to enjoin the practice of birth control. He agrees that we in the West have seriously underestimated the strength of traditional religious beliefs. He goes on to acknowledge the problem of the beleaguered Muslim community in Britain but - in the same paragraph - chooses to describe the tenets of Muslim belief in a stereotypical (and disparaging) way - "male is dominant... women's sexual pleasure taboo" - and a lot of implied scorn. My God, isn't an orthodox Jewish woman the victim of horrifying taboos?

A El-Noor then alludes to North American Indians, the Japanese, the Jews... and finally the Amish (how did they get in here?) as offering examples of those who did accommodate themselves to modern ways, or did not, it is not at all clear.

A El-Noor next has the bright idea that "Iran's clergy" is suffering from paranoia. He graciously admits that Western governments, too, cannot see the Ayatollah's fatwa as anything other than a political move. Impasse. But if the Ayatollah and his successors "fail to grasp that Western governments cannot allow a book to be burnt or an author to be proscribed", isn't it also true that very little understanding or sympathy has been offered to the Muslim community living in Britain?

They, moderate or fanatical, are under no illusions about the flippant blasphemy that is expressed in most of the book. It offends, as it was intended to; Salman Rushdie slags off his religion in the most obscene way, rather like feminists of yesteryear used to slag off the convent, and no doubt with the same personal intention in mind.

Islam, says A El-Noor kindly, was "progressive" in the time of Mohammed. Marxist critics of Islam are mostly dead - sadly true. But The Satanic Verses does not offer what A El-Noor describes as a "historical service"; it is too silly for that. Where the novel is truly moving is in its moments of recording vile racism on the part of immigration officers and members of the National Front. There the collective experience stands Rushdie in good stead; the episodes sound horribly convincing and the re-telling of them inspires him with a passion that results in good writing.

The article ends with praise for Salman Rushdie's "historical service", agrees that Iran is heavily stained by the threat, let alone the death of the author, bewails the failure of the left in Iran to confront the religious issue (in the Shah's time), and winds up asking "Who believes in Satan?" and invites all those of similar views to "follow Rushdie". Since I read no 'historical' analysis into The Satanic Verses I cannot see where Rushdie would be leading us.

I had hoped this piece would address the double dilemma that confronts us: yes, we want anyone to publish whatever they want (exception pornography) but also, and very important to socialists and all thinking people, we want the large number of Muslims in our midst not to be misheard or misunderstood.

Read Nadal El Sadawi's The Fall of the Imam (recently published by Methuen) or listen to the Black Sisters in Southall if you want a serious discussion on this subject.

THE SATANIC VERSES AFFAIR

Best-buy mystifications

From LIZ WILLIS, London:

A El-Noor's article on Islam in the last issue provides an insightful and thought-provoking treatment of the cultural dimensions of the Satanic Verses affair. At the same time, it seems taken by itself a little insufficient as a response. Of course ideas are important, indeed essential, to the discussion (and to most others, as Solidarity has always recognised), but they seem here to be dealt with too much in isolation and taken too much at face value. Some of the elements of Solidarity's good old-style analyses surely have a contribution to make, notably the key themes of authority relations, conditioning, repression and 'the irrational in politics'. To present the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism simply as a collective wish to hold on to a traditional culture misses a whole lot of points.

Just because the leaders of the movement probably hold their beliefs more or less sincerely (the proposition loses some credibility with Rafsanjani in charge) does not exclude their being engaged in power struggles, in Tehran or in Bradford, or in a search for an external enemy or scapegoat. We also need to consider how and why they manage to acquire a following: El-Noor mentions the spiritual bankruptcy of western societies without investigating the 'pull' factors that draw numbers of alienated youth - a stratum where libertarians have often looked for hopeful signs - towards the best-buy among authoritarian patriarchal mystifications. The psychology of adolescence may have considerable relevance, touching on attitudes to sexuality, aggression, group identity, rejection of authority in some aspects and acceptance of it in others (fear of freedom), and so on. It may be some consolation in this context to remember people's capacity for holding numerous contradictory ideas simultaneously, and for acting in ways at variance with their professed beliefs (which is not to disregard the menace of the genuine, even temporarily convinced fanatic).

The danger is not only to Salman Rushdie, peace be upon him (a blasphemy, this!), but to all those who would suffer from the implementation of the fundamentalist project even on a limited and local scale. Some of them are well aware of it, and the resistance is under way: the group 'Women against Fundamentalism' has confronted at least one anti-Rushdie demo with the slogans "You do not speak for

us" and "Fear is your weapon, courage is ours". They know they'll need courage, but the threat of hard-line Islamic domination is worse, and they can't wait two or three generations for a cultural critique based on a reasoned historical critique. Vital as such a critique may be, it has the air of being rather a long-term project, and quite a lot is happening now. Let's not forget the people in struggle - another good old Solidarity preoccupation - who are themselves part of the historical critique. Our best hope is that the struggle, and the reasoning, will lead to the emergence of something more acceptable than either 'assimilation' or time-warped isolation.

As usual the difficulty is to escape from the treadmill of unacceptable alternatives. Even when some are manifestly more unacceptable than others, we can still at least hint at the possibility of looking at things in a different sort of way. I think that's what Solidarity is there for.

All the best.

57 VARIETIES

The Great Beast

From TIM WOHLFORTH, California:

Ken Weller's original memory was correct (Solidarity Journal 15 and 17). Peter Fryer first published Peter Fryer's Newsletter. It was, of course, funded by Gerry Healy and printed in his print shop. After the first few issues Healy had Fryer remove his name from the title, though Fryer continued as editor and published writers from a rather broad spectrum of the left. Together with Labour Review it made for very exciting reading, and I can still remember waiting anxiously for each issue.

The material on Healy's Arabian Nights (Solidarity 16) is quite revealing. It is amazing to see the extent of it and the sums of money involved. The psychology involved strikes me as more interesting than the politics of it. What I mean is, what motivated Healy and the tiny world he created through these funds; his need to cheat history and project to his membership a mythology of success and big doings? What drove Healy to require the adulation of others? I still cannot remove from my mind and feelings the revelation that Healy personally enjoyed his ability to manipulate and humiliate others. As we now know this led to physical attacks and sexual assaults. This personal side of Healy was truly evil and therefore more politically reprehensible than his strictly political deviations. (Of course, people from your political persuasion can raise the legitimate question as to the extent that Healy's degeneration was rooted in the theory and structure of the leninist party).

I found the recent Castoriadis stuff interesting but largely unacceptable to me. I cannot accept that marxism's claim to scientific validity makes it authoritarian. I think he is plain silly when he says "Democracy implies that, in the political field, no one possesses a science which can justify statements such as 'This is true; this is false', and so on". Democracy implies only that the people are to determine the course of history whether or not political scientists believe this course is correct or incorrect. Castoriadis appears to be as convinced of the scientific correctness of his theories as the marxists are of theirs. One can raise the legitimate question as to what is or is not scientifically valid in marxism without raising what I view as an unacceptable notion that marxism's desire to be scientific is illegitimate in itself.

Best regards.

LIBERTARIAN OPTIONS

Kinnock & Co. need more than replacing

From ROBERT PEUTRELL, Athens:

I'm sorry, but if we really want to foster the ideals of libertarian socialism we have to come up with better stuff than A K Barnard's piece in Solidarity 20. Justifying his assertion that the reason the left has collapsed concerns its continuing failure to represent working class people with a reference to "a great many working class people" he has heard, is about as convincing as the stuff you read in the average anarcho-punk fanzine. Before righteously slamming the mainstream left, hadn't we better ask what the libertarian socialist current has been doing to create effective opposition? Producing vague and caricatured critiques, perhaps?

So Brent council is instructive of what? That Labour councils are more interested in their political friends than their local constituents? This might make for good public house polemics, but hardly serves as the informed commentary we sorely need. One is tempted to reply with a 'good few Labour councillors I have met' argument. In any case, if 'jobbery' is one aspect of left party politics, it hardly provides the key to understanding the whole complex relationship of the working class and the Labour Party in office. Also, it's noteworthy that no actual figures were provided to back up the writer's contention that overspending on doubtful projects was the root cause of their bankruptcy. Is the implication that if only Brent councillors had been a different bunch the situation would have been vastly different?

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VERBATIM

"Nobody has previously taken the road that leads from socialism to capitalism. And we are setting out to do just that".

"I believe it to be my and Solidarity's gravest mistake ever that we took the Prime Minister post and joined the government... - we had no choice".

LECH WALESA

"Communism was just an idea, just pie in the sky. We should keep our eyes on it, but not try and implement it here on earth".

BORIS YELTSIN

"I sometimes think I'm a simple uncomplicated anarchist. I don't like governments, and the manifestation of governments".

ERIC AMBLER

"Mick was always telling me about all this 'property is theft' stuff. He had some Gene Vincent LPs that I was rather keen to own, so I said, 'I don't feel as strongly about it as you do, but I'll take these Gene Vincent LPs', but it turned out that property was theft except for Gene Vincent LPs".

JOHN PEEL
on Mick Farren of the Deviants

"Anarchism can hardly be taken seriously as a consistent or even coherent theory of society".

EVERYMANS ENCYCLOPAEDIA

Indeed, what conclusion can we draw from the earlier statement, "The press cannot make good propaganda against an effective and well-organised opposition which argues sincerely for its beliefs and competently implements its programme", but that the real solution to the crisis of socialism is to replace Kinnock and Co. with a leadership more blessed with integrity and commitment? This, of course, flies in the face not only of what libertarians have been saying for the last hundred years, but of the actual experience of the square peg-round hole policy of parliamentary socialism.

As for the 'hard' left, is it true that they want to lead us to revolution behind a banner simply demanding nationalisation? A quick look through any of their publications reveals that the issue is clearly more complicated than that: "Nationalisation will be under workers' control" (SWP, The Future Socialist Society); "A State based on the workers' councils" (Socialist Organiser, Where We Stand); "Workers' management of nationalised industries" (Militant, What We Stand For). If the 'hard' left has historically distorted and misinterpreted what libertarians have stood for, so libertarians have done the same in return.

Furthermore, if it is the case that the 'hard' left is irrevocably tarred by Cambodian pogroms and the inefficiency of bureaucratic state capitalism etc, why is it that they continue to attract people (ordinary or otherwise) seeking a revolutionary socialist solution in a way that the libertarian socialist current does not?

The libertarian alternative may exist, but only in the heads of a few people around this and related magazines. If it's to find existence beyond that we need interventions far more substantial than A K Barnard's.

Comradely yours

How to win friends and influence people this Christmas

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