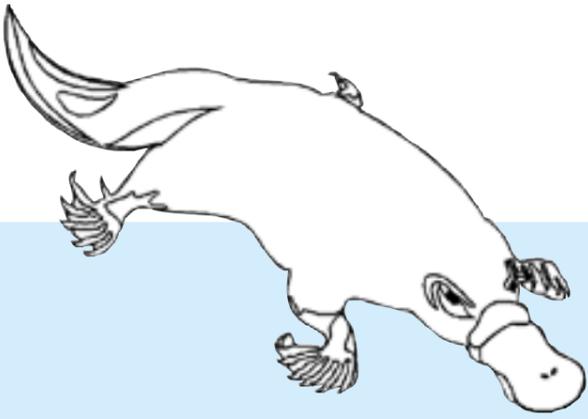


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No need for a party? Mike Macnair reports from the US Platypus convention

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US LEFT

No need for party?

The US Platypus grouping does not have a political line because there is 'no possibility of revolutionary action'. Mike Macnair reports on its convention

I attended the third annual Platypus International Convention in Chicago over the weekend April 29-May 1. The Platypus Affiliated Society is a, mainly student, left group of an odd sort (as will appear further below). Its basic slogan is: 'The left is dead; long live the left'. Starting very small, it has recently expanded rapidly on US campuses and added chapters in Toronto and Frankfurt. Something over 50 people attended the convention.

The fact of Platypus's rapid growth on the US campuses, though still as yet to a fairly small size, tells us that in some way it occupies a gap on the US left, and also tells us something (limited) about the available terms of debate. The discussions raised some interesting issues (though I am not sure how productive most of them were). It is this that makes it worth reporting the convention. This article will be an only slightly critical report of the convention; a second will offer a critique of Platypus's project.

I was invited to give a workshop on the CPGB's perspectives, and to participate in the Saturday evening plenary on 'The legacy of Trotskyism'. I also attended some of the panel discussions and the opening and closing plenaries, on 'The politics of critical theory' and 'What is the Platypus critique?'

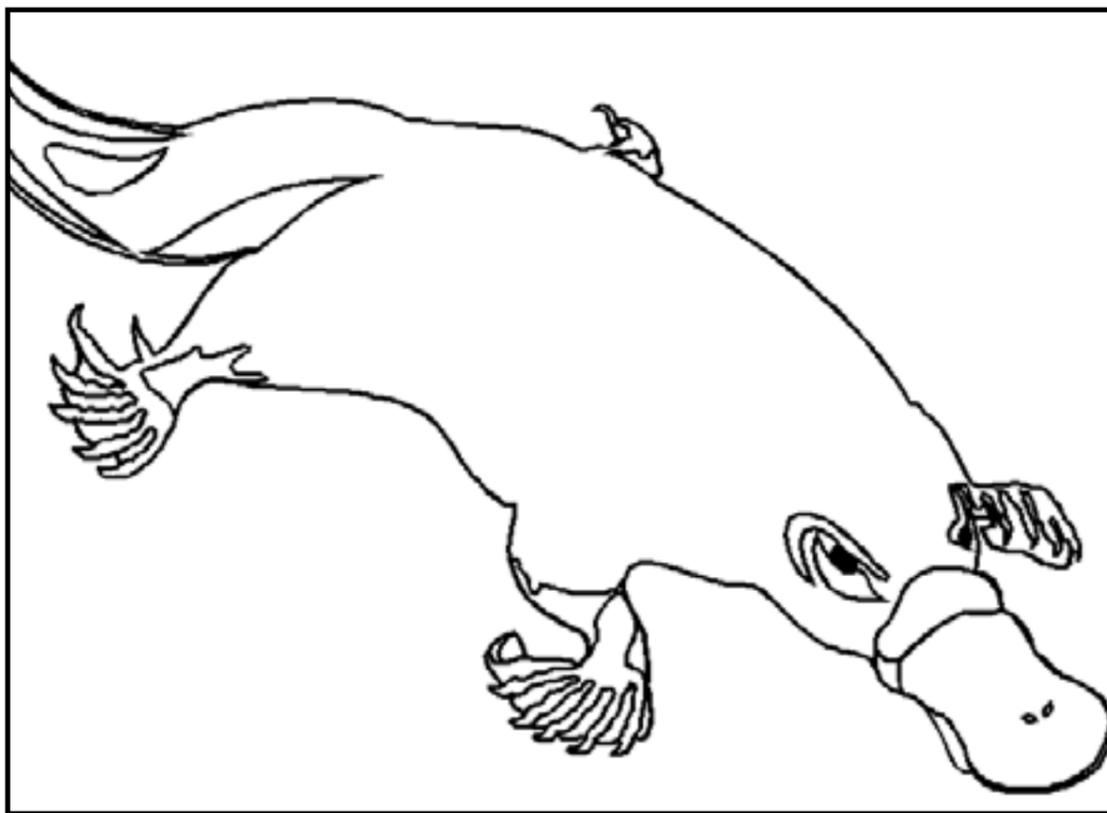
Critical theory

I got little from the opening plenary on 'The politics of critical theory' (on the Frankfurt School). The speakers were: Chris Cutrone of Platypus and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; the philosopher of technology and student of Herbert Marcuse, Andrew Feenberg of Simon Fraser University; Richard Westerman of the University of Chicago; and Nicholas Brown of the University of Illinois Chicago, as respondent to the three papers.

The plenary took as its starting point the publication by *New Left Review* in 2010 of translated excerpts from a set of notes by Greta Adorno of a series of conversations in 1956 between Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer with a view to producing a modern redraft of the *Communist manifesto*. This project got nowhere, and (as Andrew Feenberg pointed out) the Adorno-Horkheimer conversations are frequently absurd.

Feenberg, who is a 'child of 68', remarked also on the extent to which, in the conversations, Adorno and Horkheimer displayed fear of falling into Marcuse's positions: these, he argued, had more connection to the real emancipatory possibilities of the post-war world than Adorno and Horkheimer's theoreticisms.

Chris Cutrone has posted his paper, 'Adorno's Leninism', on his provocatively (or perhaps merely pretentiously) titled blog *The Last Marxist*.¹ It argues that the project of the Frankfurt School derived from the interventions of György Lukács (*History and class consciousness*) and Karl Korsch (*Marxism and philosophy*) in the 1920s, and these in turn from the 'crisis of Marxism' represented by the revisionist debate in the German Social Democratic Party in the 1890s and 1900s and the betrayal of August 1914, and the idea of Leninism as representing a philosophical alternative. So far, so John Rees or David Renton.² Adorno, he argued, continued down to his death committed to a version of these ideas.



Strange combination

After the papers had been presented and Nicholas Brown had responded, there was a brief and not particularly controversial question and answer session.

Debating politics

Saturday morning saw two 50-minute sessions of parallel workshops under the title, 'Debating politics on the left today: differing perspectives'. In the first hour the choice was between the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party of the USA (leader since 1975: Bob Avakian) and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). I went to the latter.

DSA claims to be the largest left group in the US with around 10,000 members, though the paid circulation of their paper is lower, at around 5,700 (and the Communist Party USA claimed, as of 2002, 20,000 members). The presentation made clear that the group essentially consists of activists in the left of the Democratic Party engaged in a range of campaigns for liberal good causes, plus some support for trade unionists in dispute. Its image of an alternative society is Sweden or Finland. It is committed to popular-frontist 'coalitions' and has in its constitution rejected any electoral intervention. It is, in short, not even Lib-Lab: the late 19th century Lib-Labs at least agitated for working class representation within the Liberal Party.

In the second hour the choice was between CPGB and the Marxist-Humanists US (one of the splinters from the News and Letters Collective founded by Raya Dunayevskaya). I presented the CPGB workshop. I gave a very brief capsule history of the *Leninist* and of the CPGB since 1991 and explained the nature of our orientation to 'reforging a Communist Party' through unification of the Marxists as Marxists, and on democratic centralism as an alternative to bureaucratic centralism.

The question-and-answer session which followed was lively, and I was pressed by Platypusers with the ideas that the divisions among the

left groups were, in fact, principled ones which would prohibit any unity; and that programme was less fundamental than understanding history or the movement of the class struggle. I think I was able in the short time available to answer these points reasonably clearly: *some* divisions on the left do have a principled basis, but many do not, and in any case the divisions in the early Comintern were as wide or wider; a clear, short formal party programme is essential to party democracy.

A representative of the International Bolshevik Tendency argued that our view of democratic centralism amounted to going back on the fundamental gain represented by the 1903 split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks: I pointed out that the Spartacist (and other far-left) dogmas around this split actually originated with Zinoviev's *History of the Bolshevik Party* as a factional instrument against Trotsky and were subsequently promoted as part of the Stalin school of falsification. This argument shocked him.

Panels

In the afternoon there were three sets of parallel panel sessions under the general title, 'Lessons from the history of Marxism', with (in theory) 15 minutes break between them.

In the first period the choice was between 'Marxism and the bourgeois revolutions' and 'Marxism and sexual liberation'. I have interests in both areas, but chose to go to the sexual liberation panel. It was evident from the panel blurb for 'Marxism and the bourgeois revolutions' that Platypus shares the common 'new left' error of imagining that bourgeois thought begins with the 18th century enlightenment, and that the bourgeois revolutions began with the French.³

It might be thought that Jonathan Israel's massive excavation of the links of this period with prior Dutch and English politics, religion and thinkers, in *Radical enlightenment* (2001) and *Enlightenment contested* (2006), would have disturbed this

approach and led to a return to Marx's understanding of a much more prolonged historical process of transition to capitalism, including the first experiments in the Italian city-states and the Dutch and English revolutions (visible especially in the second half of *Capital* Vol 1).

But beginning with the French Revolution and late-enlightenment ideas is, in fact, a new left dogma. It is linked to the idea that the 'Hegelian' logic of the first part of volume 1 of Marx's *Capital* can be read without reference to the broader claims of historical materialism about the history before fully developed capitalism. This approach is foundational to Lukács, Korsch and the Frankfurt school, who play an important role in Platypus's thought.

Sexual liberation

The panel on 'Marxism and sexual liberation' featured four interesting papers. Pablo Ben critiqued the Reich/Marcuse conception that 'sexual liberation' would undermine the capitalist order. This idea informed the early gay men's movement, and later the arguments of Pat Califia and others in the lesbian sadomasochism movement and its more general 'sex-positive' offshoots. The critique combined the ideas of Adorno in relation to the regulative power of capitalist economic relations over all aspects of social life with the point - well understood by historians of the issue since the 1970s - that 'sexuality' as such (ie, the link of sexual choices to personal 'identities') emerges under capitalism. This was a well argued and provocative paper. But I am not yet convinced that the detail of the theoretical approach is superior to that which Jamie Gough and I argued in the mistitled *Gay liberation in the 80s* (1985).

Greg Gabrellas argued for an interpretation of Foucault as a critic of Reich starting out from French Maoism. This was again a useful paper, though with two missing elements. He did not flag up the extent to which Foucault's historical claims

about madness and the penitentiary, as well as about the history of sexuality, have been falsified by historians. And, though he identified Foucault's tendency to marginalise class politics, he saw this as merely a product of the defeat of the left, rather than as an active intervention in favour of popular frontism. Hence he missed the extent to which the Anglo-American left academic and gay/lesbian movement reception of Foucault was closely tied to the defence of extreme forms of popular frontism by authors directly or indirectly linked to *Marxism Today*, for whom it was an instrument against the 'class-reductionist' ideas of Trotskyists.

Ashley Weger deployed the 'typical Platypus' combination of Adorno with elements of 1970s Spartacism to polemicise against the taboo/witch-hunt in relation to intergenerational sex, which she argued flowed from a fetishism of the 'innocence' of childhood and a refusal to recognise the sexual desires of youth. This paper was competently done and valuably provocative to current orthodoxies.

It nonetheless did not get as far as the British debate of the 1970s-80s on the same issue. This recognised that the other side of the coin (adult aspirations to intergenerational sex) *also* flows from fetishisms, of innocence and of powerlessness; and that statistically very much the larger part of intergenerational sex is father-daughter incest, which exploits family power relations for what is in substance *non-consensual* activity. Since an immediate transition to the 'higher stage' of communism is not to be expected, a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist state order will not result in the immediate disappearance of this problem. Accordingly any *immediate* (or 'transitional') programme point on the issue must take a form like that in the CPGB's *Draft programme*: "Abolish age-of-consent laws. We recognise the right of individuals to enter into the sexual relations they choose, provided this does not conflict with the rights of others. Alternative legislation to protect children from sexual abuse."

Lco kg'Mggurkpi's paper on the sexual emancipation of women was the weakest of the four papers, moving from Juliet Mitchell to the modern debate among feminists about 'sexy dressing', to philosopher Harriet Baber's 1987 article, 'How bad is rape?' (which argues that compulsion to do routine labour is a more serious harm to the victim),⁴ to 1970s radical feminism (whose arguments she did not grasp or attack in depth), to Moishe Postone's 2006, broadly Eustonite, 'History and helplessness',⁵ to Adorno. While various points were interesting, this did not add up to a coherent whole.

Four papers in 90 minutes, followed by brief comments from each speaker on the other papers, led to a very compressed Q&A session. Chris Cutrone asked for and got brief responses from the speakers to a general question about the relations between Marxism and liberal political theory, Pablo Ben's being the most substantial response. A woman of British origin asked about the relation of issues of sexuality to ideas of gender and the division between public and private spheres (again an aspect of the debates of the 1970s-80s) and did not get a satisfactory response.

I have gone into this panel at length because it was intellectually one of the strongest in the convention. I would nonetheless assess that the speakers were operating at a lower *theoretical* level than that of the debates of the left in the British feminist and lesbian/gay movements in the 1970s-80s.

There are two reasons why that should be the case. The first is that in our 1970s-80s debates there was a real link between theoretical arguments and positive practical politics. Practical political choices force out the logical implications of theoretical positions in a way that theoretical critique on its own does not. The second is that the sub-Frankfurt School historical schema of the 'defeat of the left' stretching back to the 'crisis of Marxism' in the 1900s has a tendency to blind its adherents to the details of concrete history. By doing so, it permits schematic theory, which moves from arbitrarily chosen elements of the concrete to the abstract, but can never return to work up the concrete as a combination of abstractions.

Maoism and lefts

The second session offered a choice between a panel on 'Badiou and post-Maoism: Marxism and communism today' and one on 'Art, culture and politics: Marxist approaches', which offered consideration of the theories of art of Trotsky, Adorno and Walter Benjamin. I went to the panel on Alain Badiou, addressed to his *The communist hypothesis* (2010) and a debate which had already developed online between Chris Cutrone of Platypus and the Maoist or post-Maoist 'Kasama project'.⁶ The panel was Chris Cutrone, Mike Ely and Joseph Ramsey of Kasama, and John Steele of Khukuri, all of whom defended Badiou; Mike Ely's paper is available on Kasama, John Steele's on Khukuri, and Cutrone's on his blog.⁷

The arguments of Badiou's defenders on this panel are intellectually and politically uninteresting. They seem to be merely a new version of the tendency of the ex-Maoist, ex-Eurocommunist, and academic left to episodic fashions, like the fashion for Roy Bhaskar's 'critical realism' which ran for some years in the 1990s.

Cutrone's argument judges, I think correctly, that Badiou's 'communism' is directly anti-Marxist.⁸ Cutrone therefore equally correctly appeals to the Second International and its left as the high point of the movement against capitalism to date: it was this movement that *made possible* 1917. But he tends not to interpret the strength of the late 19th century movement in terms of Marx's and Engels' idea of capitalism creating its own gravedigger in the proletariat, and hence the key to the movement being the political self-organisation of the working class.

Instead, he poses the need for an emancipatory movement to start from the conquests of capitalism - which is, indeed, central to Marxism - in terms of the conquests of *liberalism*. The political logic of this intellectual move is the path followed by the Schachtmanites, by Adorno and Horkheimer, and more recently by the British Revolutionary Communist Party/*Spiked* and the Eustonites, towards the political right.

The final panel session offered a choice between 'Marxism and political philosophy' with the same late-enlightenment focus as the 'bourgeois revolutions' panel, here on 'The classical figures of bourgeois political thought: Rousseau, Kant, Hegel'; and 'The Marxism of the Second International radicals'. I attended the latter, featuring papers by Chris Cutrone, Greg Gabrellas, Ian Morrison and Marco Torres.

I may have missed something by arriving late, but I did not get much

out of this panel beyond the stale new left orthodoxy about the sterility of the SPD majority which is, as I have already indicated, more clearly defended by British authors from the Cliffite tradition like Rees and Renton.

In Chris Cutrone's paper I was struck by three specific features. The first is that he claimed that Marx and Engels were suspicious of political parties.⁹ This is plain nonsense and I have provided the evidence to the contrary in the second of my articles on electoral tactics: Marx and Engels argued from the 1840s to the 1890s in *support* of the working class forming itself into a political party.¹⁰

The second, and related, feature is the claim that political parties were a new phenomenon in the late 19th century and suspect to earlier 'classical liberals'. The latter part of this claim is true, but the former is simply false: if the Dutch Regent oligarchy did without formal parties, Whigs and Tories in Britain appeared in 1679-81, reappeared promptly in 1688-89, and continued to dominate political life until the Whigs were replaced by the Liberals in the mid-19th century. What was new in the late 19th century and with the SPD was *highly organised, mass-membership* political parties with democratic structures. This was a product of the political intervention of the proletariat as such and is reflected in the fact that in the US, where the proletariat has not succeeded in breaking into high politics, the Democrats and Republicans retain looser organisational forms.

The third feature was Cutrone's reliance for analysis of the SPD on Peter Nettl's 1965 article on the SPD as a 'political model'.¹¹ This is, to be blunt, unambiguously a work of cold war sociology, which seeks to force the conclusion that the only real choices available in politics are between reformist coalitionism and something derived from the 'actionism' of Georges Sorel and the ultra-left.¹² Its analysis of the SPD is apolitical-Weberian.

Nettl's story reaches its climactic with the betrayal of August 1914. But missing, accordingly, are, first, the later emergence of the USPD as a mass opposition, and, second, the fact that the working class *did in fact* use the SPD and its Austrian equivalent, the SPÖ, as organising instruments in the overthrow of the Hohenzollern and Habsburg monarchies in 1918-19. Of course, the leaderships held back to national horizons and created 'democratic republics', which were in reality bourgeois parliamentary-constitutional regimes.¹³ These circumstances fit better with a *political* account of the SPD's and the wartime and post-war Kautskyites' failure to serve the interests of the working class - because of their nationalism and false political ideas on the state - than with Nettl's Weberian sociological story of political impotence through 'isolationism'.

Platypus calls on us to recover the history of the left in order to understand and get beyond its present 'death'. But in its own attempts to do so, the standard of *historical work* is sloppy.

Trotskyism

The Saturday evening plenary on 'The legacy of Trotskyism' featured labour historian Bryan Palmer, of Trent University (Ontario, Canada); Jason Wright from the International Bolshevik Tendency; myself; and Richard Rubin from Platypus. The panel description contained the claim that, "As one Platypus writer has suggested, Trotsky is as out of place in the post-World War II world as Voltaire or Rousseau would have been in the world after the French Revolution. Trotsky, unlike Trotskyism, exemplifies the classical Marxism of the early 20th century, and that tradition certainly died with

him."

Bryan Palmer is a Trotskyist, and (as far as can be seen from online sources) one coming from the background of the part of the US Socialist Workers Party and its international tendency that did not break with Trotskyism in the 1980s.¹⁴ His speech made nods in the direction of Platypus's claims, but asserted positively that the crash of 2008 showed the relevance of Marxism today; that the defeats of the 20th century are the result of Stalinism; and that the ideas of Trotsky and Trotskyism - especially the idea that the crisis of humanity reduces to the crisis of revolutionary leadership - retain all their relevance. The problem was a *trahison des clercs*, in which the intellectuals sought new alternative ideas repudiating the basics of Marxism, as with postmodernism, rather than attempt to put Trotsky's ideas into practice.

Jason Wright gave the sort of speech that could be expected: revolutionary continuity runs through the Fourth International 1938-53, the International Committee 1953-61, the Revolutionary Tendency of the US SWP and, following it, the Spartacist League, from 1961 to the 1980s; and thereafter the IBT. The CPGB, he said in passing, breaks with the tradition of the pre-war socialist movement as well as that of Bolshevism by calling for votes for bourgeois candidates. I did not get an opportunity to reply to this at the meeting, but my recent three-part series on electoral principles and tactics can serve as a reply - to the extent that it is worth replying.

I criticised the formulations proposed in the panel description. In the first place 'Trotskyism' means an organised political movement formed on the basis of definite programmatic documents - those of the first four congresses of the Comintern, of the International Left Opposition and of the 1938 founding congress of the Fourth International. The Trotskyist movement has splintered into diverse fragments, but it is on its formally adopted positions that it is to be judged and criticised.

Secondly, 'classical Marxism' is an amalgam, like the 'counterrevolutionary bloc of rights and Trotskyites'. In the sense in which it used by Platypus, it derives from the new left's, and hence the British SWP's, attempt to paste together Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lukács and Gramsci, in spite of their diverse and in some respects opposed political and theoretical positions.¹⁵ To say that "Trotsky, unlike Trotskyism, exemplifies the classical Marxism of the early 20th century, and that tradition certainly died with him" is therefore an empty claim. What is needed to understand the past of Marxist theory is to understand the political and theoretical disputes of the Comintern in the light of the political and theoretical disputes of the Second International and of the pre-1917 RSDLP.

Within this framework, in the first place the idea of separating Trotsky from post-war Trotskyism is wrong. Secondly, it is necessary, in order to progress, to critique the actual programmatic positions of the first four congresses of the Comintern and of Trotskyism, as I have attempted in *Revolutionary strategy* (2008). The most fundamental point is the rejection of bureaucratic centralism. Thirdly, the failures of the Trotskyists are not all given by some Trotskyist (or 'Pabloite') original sin: there are lessons, albeit mostly negative, to be learned from the Trotskyists' attempts to build small groups into something larger and to intervene in live politics.

Richard Rubin argued that revolutionary continuity is impossible; there is a fundamental discontinuity in politics and the main task is to understand it. Trotskyism is merely a historical relic. Trotsky insisted on the *accidental* character

of the tragedy of the 20th century; but the idea of an accidental epoch is inconsistent with historical materialism. We have to be Marxists because there is no better way of thinking, but Marxism may be inadequate; the failure of Trotskyism expresses the antecedent crisis of Marxism. Both Stalinism and fascism were products of the failure of the German revolution. This 'German question' poses the question how the strongest Marxist party in the world, the SPD, could betray its own revolution. Since the objective conditions for socialism had matured, the explanation had to be the power of bourgeois ideology; both Trotsky and the Frankfurt school grappled with this problem.

The outcome of World War II represented a victory for the enlightenment, but a defeat of revolutionary possibilities. In the 1950s-60s Trotskyists as well as Maoists were prone to illusions in third-world nationalisms. The 1968 period offered a 'Dionysian moment' of 'revolution through pure ecstasy'; the Trotskyists, except the Sparts, integrated themselves in the new left and lost the character of Trotskyism as a critique of the existing left. It was this aspect of Trotskyism as honest critique and fidelity to the October revolution that had to be redeemed.

The speakers were given an opportunity to respond to each other and this was followed by slightly longer than usual Q&A discussion. Four substantial issues were posed. In the first place it seemed to be the common view of the other panellists that the divisions of the Trotskyist left were in fact principled and unavoidable splits, a view which I rejected. Secondly, a questioner asked whether the evolution of some US ex-Trotskyists towards neo-conservatism reflected something about Trotskyism; on this there seemed to be general acceptance of a point I made, in response, that such an evolution is not found in Europe, while ex-Stalinists had also gone over to the right.

The third was whether defeats for your own imperialist power make revolution more likely, as Jason Wright argued - in my view falsely, except in the case of defeat in *inter-imperialist*, or great-power, war. Pablo Ben raised from the floor the classic case of the Argentinean left's shipwreck when it supported the military regime's aggression in the 1982 South Atlantic war. Richard Rubin argued that defeatism was a moral obligation, but not one from which revolution could be expected. This, I think, underrates the issue. Even if defeatism in our own country's unjust wars cannot usually be expected either to *cause* a defeat or to bring on revolution campaigning on a defeatist stance educates as wide layers of the working class as possible in the need for political independence from the local capitalist state, and thereby *prepares the political ground* for circumstances in which revolution is on the immediate agenda.

The fourth and most general question was whether revolution *is* on the agenda and if so in what sense, and whether a party is therefore called for. Bryan Palmer's and Jason Wright's answer to these questions was emphatically yes. Chris Cutrone's (from the floor) and Richard Rubin's was that the objective conditions were present, but the subjective conditions even for a party were not present. My own response was that proletarian revolution is on the *historical* agenda; that the weakness of proletarian organisation takes it off the short-term agenda; and that if Lenin's 'the ruling class cannot go on in the old way and the masses will not' was to be placed on the *immediate* agenda the result would therefore be disastrous. But the result

is precisely that the party question, and the tasks of patiently rebuilding the workers' movement, *are* on the immediate agenda.

Platypus critique

The Sunday morning plenary on 'What is the Platypus critique?', with three Platypus speakers, was in one way the oddest and in another the most symptomatic of the sessions. Spencer Leonard opened by saying that Platypus was sometimes said to have a line which combined Spartacist Trotskyism with Adorno. This was incorrect: Platypus *does not have a political line*. Rather it recognises that there is no present possibility of revolutionary political action, because of the deep-going crisis of Marxism. Its goal is therefore to bring the left to a recognition of its own failure and to address the theoretical issues. To this end it aims to 'host the conversation'.

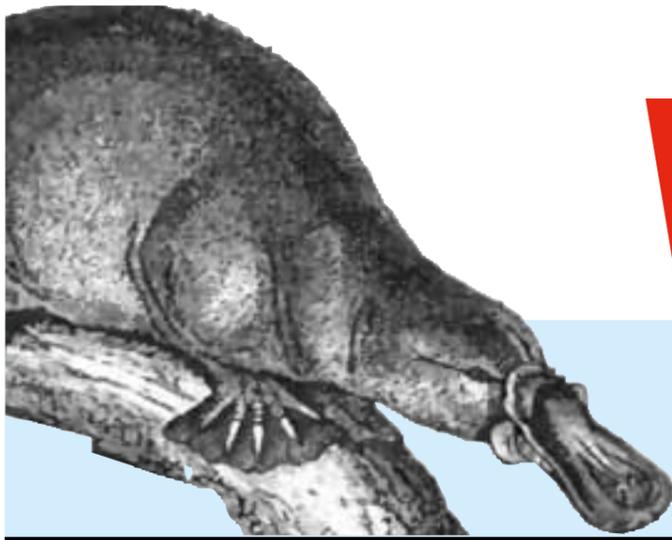
He was followed by Laurie Rojas, speaking to her organisational work for Platypus: this again focussed on the necessity (and difficulty) of addressing the left, but also emphasised the constant return of the *necessity* of the Platypus project. The final speaker was Ben Shepard, whose speech was interspersed by readings from Samuel Beckett, with Spencer Leonard attempting to take the other part - I take it using absurdism to indicate the present left's absurdity; I am sorry to say that I found this sufficiently distracting that I can say no more about the points he made.

The plenary started late and the Q&A session was brief. One self-described "newbie" said from the floor that she felt at the end of the weekend rather as if she had accidentally wandered into a postgraduate philosophy seminar. A more accurate description would be a *literary theory* seminar. The panel on political theory which I missed *might* have had the analytical or phenomenological rigour found in philosophy seminars. But most of the theoretical papers I heard had the 'neither quite rigorous philosophy nor quite rigorous history' quality of many literary theory papers ●

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Notes

1. <http://chriscutrone.platypus1917.org>.
2. J Rees *The algebra of revolution: the dialectic and the classical Marxist tradition* London 1998; D Renton *Classical Marxism: socialist theory and the Second International* Cheltenham 2002; and see my review of both books *Weekly Worker* September 11 2003.
3. For another example of B Fine *Democracy and the rule of law* (1984; reprint Caldwell, NJ 2002).
4. *Hypatia* Vol 2, pp125-38.
5. *Public Culture* 18, pp93-110; also available at various places on the web.
6. <http://kasamaproject.org>.
7. Steele: www.khukuritheory.net/why-is-badiou-of-political-value; Cutrone: <http://chriscutrone.platypus1917.org/?p=1144>.
8. Andrew Coates has made somewhat similar points against Slavoj Žižek, with whom Badiou is linked, in this paper ('The leadership of "events"', March 3). Cf also James Turley's review of *Lenin reloaded* ('Hegel reloaded?', December 13 2007).
9. He based this on the far left's common but inaccurate exegesis of the statement in the *Communist manifesto* that "The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working class parties" (in which, in fact, "the other working class parties" means *only* the Chartists and the related US National Reformers).
10. 'Principles to shape tactics' *Weekly Worker* April 21.
11. *Past and Present* No30, pp65-95; more on the same line in Nettl's two-volume biography of Rosa Luxemburg (1966).
12. Nettl seeks to distinguish Luxemburg from the anarchists on the grounds that her version of activism was based on the spontaneous movement of the working class masses, not arbitrary 'initiatives' of the revolutionaries. But this shows only that, if Nettl had read Sorel at all, he had not done so with any care.
13. More in my 'Leading workers by the nose' *Weekly Worker* September 13 2007.
14. This appears from the judgments of his review essay on Jan Willem Stutje's *Ernest Mandel* (2010) *55 International Review of Social History* pp117-32.
15. There is an older usage belonging to the cold war academy, in which 'classical Marxism' was used to mean a (caricatural) version of Marxism before Lenin.



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Platypus: is it a sect? Is it an academic grouping? Is it a theoretical dead end?

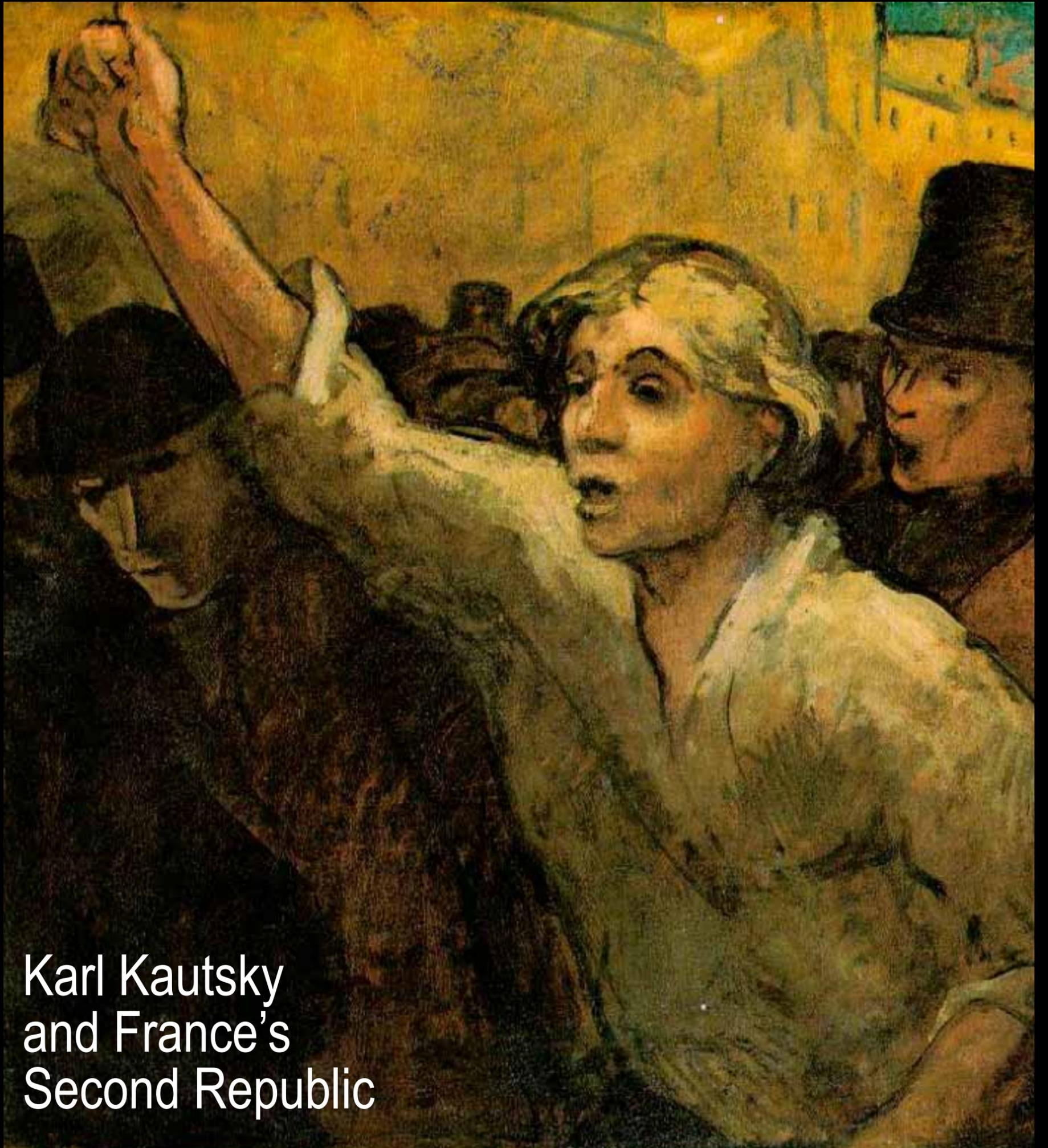
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LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

Platypus

On behalf of Platypus, let me express how greatly we appreciate Mike Macnair's very thorough report on and critiques of the events at the recent Platypus convention in Chicago from April 29 to May 1, at which we were very happy and grateful to have his participation ('No need for party?', May 12).

However, I disagree with how Macnair characterises Peter Nettl's argument, which I referenced, specifically to show how Luxemburg's and Lenin's Marxist revolutionism offered an alternative to both opportunist reformism and (anarchistic or Sorelian) actionism. I think Macnair avoids (or I didn't present clearly enough) the issue I was raising about the inherent unavoidable authoritarianism of late 19th century mass (working class) parties that needed to be worked through by later Marxism (unlike circa 1848), and the problems of which Lenin and Luxemburg were aware, unlike the German Social Democratic Party centre (of Bebel and Kautsky) and later Stalinism (including Maoism).

Luxemburg's pamphlets, *Reform or revolution?* and *The mass strike*, hone their critiques of the SPD and broader Second International precisely on this score, as does, more broadly, Trotsky's *Results and prospects* (see especially the section on 'The prerequisites of socialism'). This concern, the problem of the *raison d'être* of the social democratic (and later communist) party, is less explicit, but nonetheless present as a key background issue in Lenin's *What is to be done?* and *The state and revolution*, as well as his *Leftwing communism* and *Imperialism* pamphlets. The Second International radicals recognised, after Marx and Engels, the modern state and its political parties as phenomena of Bonapartism - that is, the need for proletarian socialist revolution.

On 'the bourgeois revolution', the historiography offered by some members of Platypus by way of perspective does not treat the 1789-1815 Great French Revolution as the 'first', but rather the last of the great bourgeois revolutions, and somewhat late at that, explaining in part its pathologies; and in the Marxist view 1830 and 1848 were already 'proletarian'. The importance of the earlier Dutch and British experience is very much present in our minds as the original emergence of modern bourgeois society, such that bourgeois Britain was the bastion of reaction against the French revolution. So I think the perspective we tend to adopt in the Platypus approach to this history is not so 'new leftist'/post-1960s as Macnair suspects.

Our general perspective in Platypus is that, for Marx, proletarian socialism not only potentially 'negates', but also importantly potentially 'completes', the bourgeois revolution (at a global, world-historical scale), that the crisis of bourgeois society in capital is the need for socialism, but that socialism was not understood by Marx to be a final end-point: rather a potential new beginning for human history.

I look forward to the promised second part of Macnair's critique of Platypus as a project. However, I would caution that it is important to note the actual basis of our project - that is, our "hosting the critical conversation on the left" (about Marxism), that we don't think will take place without our project's specific focus. This, and not any purported 'Platypus positions' to be derived, for instance, from my or other Platypus members' writings, requires judgment and criticism. We've

published the transcripts of most of our major public fora, so I think our project should be judged on the basis of whether these are productive. The convention that Macnair attended threatens to give a skewed perspective on our actual activities, which don't usually put forward Platypus members' takes so prominently or, in some instances, (nearly) exclusively as at our convention. There is a potentially important distinction between what we do as an organised project and the consensus of how we understand the need for our project - that is, our take on Marxism. As a project, we want to be judged on our practice rather than on our 'theory', whatever the latter's limitations.

Lastly, the title of my online collection of writings for Platypus, *The last Marxist*, is indeed meant to be provocative (what would it mean to make such a claim or have such an aspiration?), but with what I hope is recognisable humour, if not exactly tongue in cheek.

Chris Cutrone
email

Misconceptions

I wanted to clear up some misconceptions about the Democratic Socialists of America. I don't know who represented DSA at the Platypus convention, but apparently she or he didn't do a good job.

No, we don't have 10,000 members at present (the high point of the organisation was in the early 1990s, with around 11,000 paid-up members). We have, last I knew, around 6,000. Some members may think we have more, but they're misinformed.

Our image of an alternative society is not Sweden or Finland. We say that the immediate struggle in the United States is to force reforms into existence that make the US economy more 'Scandinavian', if you will, but that does not exhaust our vision. We're explicitly for workers' self-management and democratic planning and such. A number of members are taken with the model in David Schweickart's *After capitalism*, which I think is a well-written book, if too 'market socialist' for my taste. I think the work of Pat Devine provides a better vision - one of more comprehensive planning - and I've promoted it within the DSA.

This brings us to the Democratic Party question. I'll present the mainstream DSA position (one with which I've traditionally agreed, but am currently somewhat sceptical of).

The DSA is in and around the left wing of the Democratic Party mainly because (a) most of the people we want to work with and recruit are there, including rank-and-file unionists, and (b) the US has an electoral system which makes the formation of a mass left/labour party uniquely difficult. In a parliamentary system where the members of parliament select the prime minister as head of government - especially in countries with proportional representation - electing minor party legislators is much easier. But in a system like that of the US, where the president is elected separately by nationwide votes and members of Congress are elected in single-member districts, only two parties can survive.

You note the organisational looseness of the Democrats (and Republicans). In fact, today they are both quasi-state institutions - no longer political parties in the European parliamentary sense; they are legally regulated structures with fixed times and places, where anyone can register. Open to all, they have no ideological requirements for membership. To become a Republican or Democrat, you just register as such. In fact, these are not really parties at all, but coalitions of more or less compatible

social forces, in which various groups contest for influence under a common banner. Of course, it is still difficult for any individual or group to succeed in this process without lots of money. But organised groups with clear programmatic ideas and a long-term commitment can become forces within either party. The mainstream of the DSA thinks that labour and the left should do precisely that within the Democrats - to become 'a party within a party'. The DSA supports left Democrats like Dennis Kucinich and John Conyers to that end. (I admit that this is not always spelled out explicitly within DSA literature, but that's the thinking.)

Is this popular frontist? It's not intended as such. It has nothing to do with old CPUSA arguments for supporting 'representatives of the progressive wing of the bourgeoisie' or what have you. The argument is that Democrats such as Kucinich and Conyers are *not* representatives of the capitalist class; that they are traditional social democratic-type workers' reps, because the Democratic Party is in fact basically a structureless line on the ballot which is open for (class) contestation.

Now all this may be wrong, but I'd say it's something better than "not even Lib-Lab".

Jason Schulman
New York

De rigueur

I thought Mike Macnair's article on the Platypus convention was very interesting. The only thing I would want to raise for the sake of clarity, as opposed to a dispute over politics, is his invocation of philosophical rigour.

While it is true that philosophical rigour is part of a ruthless critique of anything existing, Adorno in *Minima moralia* writes: "The injunction to practise intellectual honesty usually amounts to sabotage of thought." And he goes on to detail how the antithetical function of thought is undermined by this injunction.

Naturally, there is an issue with simply affirming or denouncing intellectual rigour: neither nonsense nor triviality will suffice as modes of thought today, nor could they ever, but I think that the issue Adorno raises of intellectual rigour falling into affirmation is a very real one. Indeed that is what has largely happened to analytic philosophy. Wittgenstein's literary executor was Anscombe: while a brilliant philosopher, her Catholicism was compatible with her philosophy because of its irrelevance.

The real question about philosophical rigour is not textual analysis, but philosophy as a method of thought about our world and our place in it. In that respect the advent of philosophical rigour has been only one side of a defeat, either in the form of obtuse French theory or positivism that, while intriguing and better than its modern followers, cannot say much about the questions we all face today.

As for Mike's account of the convention itself, while it is true that Richard Rubin did coin the excellent phrase, 'neo-Kautskyan', at Mike's presentation and most of the Platypodes were sympathetic to his critique of your project, it is not true that a lot of us thought the splits in the Trotskyists were principled. I regret that there was not a chance to push the sectarians in the room on the principled or unprincipled nature of their splits. I think this was a result of how well Mike presented the case for unity as a practical matter, and indeed 'Pythonism' in splits has been a deeply ingrained feature in the movement on this side of the Atlantic as well - a fact we all know well in Platypus. Afterwards I heard quite a bit of sympathy and agreement around Mike's position on the need for unity

at this moment, although most also felt this would be insufficient for resurrecting the left.

Anyway, I am looking forward to the upcoming article on the Platypus project itself and following the CPGB with great interest.

Watson Ladd
Platypus Affiliated Society

Defeatist

I believe that Mike Macnair is wrong in his analysis of the position of the early Comintern and Trotsky in relation to the question of the 'anti-imperialist united front' and the tactics of communists in relation to the national and colonial question (Letters, May 12).

Besides the fact that the Comintern in its Fourth Congress theses explicitly talks about opposing pan-Islamism masquerading as anti-imperialism, Mike fails to take into account what Lenin had said in the debate around the theses, or indeed in previous discussions within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party on the question. In those earlier discussions, for instance, Lenin talks about guarding against movements that were in effect acting as agents of external powers. But, more clearly, in his contribution at the Second Congress, he says: "... as communists we will only support the bourgeois freedom movements in the colonial countries if these movements are really revolutionary and if their representatives are not opposed to us training and organising the peasantry in a revolutionary way. If that is no good, then the communists there also have a duty to fight against the reformist bourgeoisie ..." (www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch04.htm).

Mike says that there are lots of examples in the 20th century where nationalist movements have simply turned into Stalinist regimes. That is true, but is that in itself proof that the tactic of supporting a non-imperialist state against an imperialist state in a war, where the latter is trying to subjugate the former, is falsified? No, of course not.

Simply applying the correct strategy is no guarantee of victory in anything. Given the extremely weak forces that revolutionary Marxists had at their disposal compared with the forces of reformism, Stalinism and imperialism, it would have been remarkable if simply having the correct strategy were sufficient to guarantee success. But it would be opportunistic in the extreme to conclude from that balance of class forces that we should abandon basic Marxist principles.

The main problem has been that in many of these struggles, the revolutionaries have not adopted the position of Lenin and the Comintern, as set out in the quote above, and have simply turned themselves into cheerleaders for the nationalist forces rather than setting themselves the task of building up a genuine revolutionary movement in the process of opposing imperialist aggression. Take Trotsky's position in relation to Mexico under Cardenas. Was Trotsky right to support the Cardenas regime in opposing British imperialism and nationalising British oil interests in Mexico? I find it hard to believe any revolutionary Marxist could answer no to that question. But Trotsky did not simply become a cheerleader for Cardenas in the way some today have done in relation to Chávez. He argued against Mexican revolutionaries submerging themselves in the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and argued instead for the need to build a Mexican workers' party.

I would suggest another concrete case where Mike might wish to consider the implications of what he is saying. That is France under German occupation. Is he saying that, if the Free French resistance movement had

proposed some joint activity with the communist resistance, he would have opposed such a joint action? That seems to me to be ultra-left, third-periodist madness. Of course, in any such case, the revolutionaries have to go into such an arrangement with their eyes wide open, and believing that those with whom they are making this tactical alliance are likely to stab them in the back, but to refuse to agree to such action would undoubtedly condemn the revolutionaries in the eyes of the masses.

What Mike's argument really comes down to is the fact that we cannot apply this strategy because we are too small. But history shows that revolutionary organisations that refuse to defend basic principles are doomed never to become larger forces. But I would ask Mike then what the conclusion of his thesis is in relation to Libya? Presumably, if he is opposed to supporting Libya, as against British, US, French imperialism, etc, then he will not be unhappy to see imperialism install its own puppet regime in Tripoli.

I contend that the revolutionary Marxist position remains to oppose imperialist aggression and intentions, to support any truly revolutionary forces in Libya, and to propose joint action with other forces against imperialism, whilst continuing to ruthlessly expose the class nature of those forces, to expose their inability to wage an effective struggle against imperialism and, where necessary, as Lenin says above, "the communists there also have a duty to fight against the reformist bourgeoisie". For Marxists outside Libya, our duty is to support any genuine revolutionary forces - I am not at all convinced that the 'rebel' forces come under that heading - and to assist in whatever way we can the building of independent working class organisations.

We should attempt to assist in the building of links between workers in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and other adjoining states. We should attempt to make contacts with genuine revolutionary socialist organisations in Libya and provide them with arms, finance and other practical support. I cannot for one moment imagine that, were I a revolutionary Marxist in Libya, adopting the defeatist position as Mike suggests, in the face of massive imperialist aggression, would be a credible position.

Arthur Bough
email

No mention

It's a wee bit disappointing that Anne Mc Shane totally leaves out the results of militant nationalist and republican candidates in the local election in the six occupied counties, only mentioning the Irish Republican Socialist Party in Belfast ('Governing parties consolidate', May 12). She doesn't mention the particularly strong votes of the IRSP in Strabane, Gerry Donnelly of the 32-County Sovereignty Movement in Derry or Eirígí in West Belfast and Fermanagh, where they got a councillor elected.

Are militant nationalists not worth mentioning in a communist paper? The platforms of these groups are in many points much more progressive than the petty bourgeois, anti-nationalist manifestos of tiny Trotskyite groups like the People Before Profit Alliance, the Socialist Party or the Socialist Workers Party.

Dieter Reinisch
Vienna

Dreary

Anne Mc Shane's article on the assembly and council elections in the Six Counties rightly notes the importance of the national question there and the failure of the SP and SWP to address it.

US LEFT

Theoretical dead end

The US Platypus group is in the borderlands of two types of left, argues Mike Macnair in the second of two articles

In last week's paper I reported on the third Platypus International Convention in Chicago, April 29-May 1.¹ The concluding plenary discussed the 'Platypus critique', where speakers from the group denied that it had "a line". This, and the convention as a whole, pose another question: the critique of the Platypus.

If it was really the case that the Platypus Affiliated Society had no political line or agenda, but merely aimed to 'host the conversation', then to critique it would be like offering a critique of large, vague academic 'learned societies' like the classicists' American Philological Association or the English Lit crowd's Modern Language Association.

Such a critique would only be worthwhile to the extent that the learned society in question *already* dominated the 'conversation' in question, and in doing so maintained an *implicit* line - like the idea of 'western civilisation', which had the effect of excluding work which did not comply from academic recognition. This situation certainly exists in the economists' learned societies (exclusionary dominance of neoclassical microeconomics), and *de facto* exists in several Eng Lit societies (exclusionary dominance of postmodernism).

For a small group like Platypus such a critique would be pointless. In reality, however, Platypus both does not, and does, have a political line and agenda.

It does not have a political line and agenda in the sense that it does not call for votes for anyone, or vote on a platform or political positions which it is to defend in common. The comrades claim that because of the death of the left this is *impossible* without the prior theoretical critique which might, at some unspecified date in the future, make political action possible.

It does, however, have a political line and agenda - even if this was only the statement on its website: "Hence, to free ourselves, we declare that the left is dead. Or, more precisely, that we are all that is left of it." This involves identification with "the left" or at least with its history; and a *negative* critique of the existing left. Other things apart, it would also be the classic claim of a sect.

Imperialism

In fact, there is more, and it centres on the issue of imperialism. Platypus's claim that "the left is dead" is a claim motivated at the end of the day partly by the perception that the left has become so small as to be politically irrelevant, but also by the perception that the left has abandoned the project of general human emancipation.

The basis of this perception is expressed in a wide variety of articles on Platypus's website - some by Platypus members, others expressed by their choices about who to interview or review. Here the idea of 'Spartacism plus Adorno', considered as *critiques* rather than as positive policy, has explanatory value.

From Spartacism come hostility to 'statist feminism', which allies with the right on sexual purity issues, and to other reactionary-utopian politics like 'green' arguments for 'small is beautiful', anti-technology, anti-globalisation, ideas of the peasantry or indigenous peoples as 'showing the way', and Maoism. From the political culture of Spartacism come the 'in your face' provocations like "the left



Chris Cutrone

is dead ... we are all that is left of it". With much, though not all, of the political substance of this critique of the contemporary left CPGB comrades would agree, though we do not draw the sect conclusion.

From Adorno, and *not* from Spartacism, come defence of capitalist 'high culture' and hostility to riots for the sake of 'resistance' - and hostility to the 'anti-imperialism' which demands that the left *side with* whoever is the current target of US military operations, even if they are obvious tyrants like the Ba'athists or Libyan Jamahiriya or clericalist reactionaries like the Iranian regime.

This last, of course, has led to the interpretation that Platypus is *presently* Eustonite: people who favour the victory of the US imperialism's military operations over the alternative on the basis of the unattractive character of the targets. The case was sharply made by Louis Proyect in 2010. His conclusion is:

"What we are dealing with is a section of the academic left that has become profoundly disoriented and succumbed to the pressure of living inside the US, the world's largest and most dangerous hegemon in history. The purpose of this article is to put a skull-and-bones sign next to the poisoned well they drink from, so as to warn any young graduate student to not drink the water at the risk of political death."²

There are two issues involved: one of politics and one of theory. The theory issue means specifically the theory of the problem Richard Rubin asked us to address in the Trotsky plenary at the convention: the problem of the defeat of the German revolution of 1918-19 at the hands of the SPD leadership, or, more exactly, the limitation of the German revolution to the creation of a capitalist state and the actual participation of this state in counterrevolutionary military operations against the Russian Revolution.

Politics

The issue of politics is simple. Suppose a movement which seeks general human emancipation. *In fact* today as in 1900, albeit in different juridical forms, there is a hierarchy of countries. Countries higher up the global pecking order feel free to assist 'their' corporations to bribe officials in countries lower down the pecking order. If 'unacceptable' actions are taken by the governments of countries lower down, they feel free to intervene with covert support to minority and terrorist groups, and so on. And, when push comes to shove, they intervene with direct military force.

It should be clear that general human emancipation is inconsistent with the hierarchy of countries, and

that a movement which claims to seek general human emancipation but gives political support to this hierarchy is engaged in political doublethink.

At the same time, *only* Lenin's theory of imperialism - that it represents the final stage of capitalism and World War I the opening of a terminal crisis or *Zusammenbruch* - gives support to the conclusion drawn by the Comintern and maintained by Trotsky, that communists in imperialist countries must not only oppose the imperialist actions of their own countries, but also *seek the victory of the nationalist movement of the subordinated country, even if it is authoritarian or clerical-reactionary in character*. Not even Bukharin's or Luxemburg's theories, which are closest to Lenin's, support this conclusion.

And, in fact, the evidence of 20th century history is unambiguously clear that both the *theory* of terminal crisis (Trotsky's 'death agony of capitalism') and the *political conclusion* drawn from it of alliance of the workers' movement with petty bourgeois nationalists in the 'anti-imperialist united front' are false - as false and as disproved as the theory of phlogiston.

These circumstances require advocates of general human emancipation in countries high up the pecking order to pursue a *two-sided* policy in relation to their own countries' coercive operations against countries lower down. On the one hand, it is necessary to *oppose* these operations clearly, unambiguously and as far as possible practically. On the other, it is also necessary to give political solidarity and what practical support can be given to emancipatory movements in the countries targeted - and therefore to avoid stupidly prettifying tyrants, local Bonapartes, clerical reactionaries, etc, merely because they may from time to time talk 'anti-imperialist' talk.

To err on either side of this line once or twice or even several times is merely to err. To develop a *consistent* position one side or another of this line is to become a political agent of the system of global hierarchy: ie, to oppose general human emancipation.

The 'anti-imperialist' left gives political support to people who are the US's enemies now but have been their allies in the past and may well be again in the future; in doing so it makes itself an enemy of the local workers' movement in the country in question, and more concretely aids the regimes against the exiles of the workers' movements.

Groups like the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and the Eustonites, by focusing their fire *only* on 'third world' tyrants without simultaneously up-front and explicitly opposing imperialist operations, become 'useful idiots' for the imperialist states - whose operations in the subordinated countries are as tyrannical as their opponents.

Richard Rubin in the Trotsky plenary said that defeatism is a moral obligation, but not one which could be expected to lead to revolution. What I have said so far is broadly consistent with this. This is because I have taken as the starting point *only* the Platypus claim that the left has died because it has abandoned the aim of general human emancipation, and supposed *only* that the movement is to fight for general human emancipation. It still follows that the movement cannot

be true to itself *as a movement for general human emancipation* without its sections in the countries higher up the global hierarchy displaying explicit, upfront and active opposition to this hierarchy, and therefore to the blockade and war operations of their own countries.

Chris Cutrone is Platypus's (presumably elected) president. He writes, not infrequently, on Middle Eastern affairs in its journal, *Platypus Review*. His language in these articles is at best Delphic - obscure and capable of multiple interpretations. Cutrone is (as an academic) a pupil of Moishe Postone, and says openly that his politics are influenced by Postone. Postone unambiguously *is* a Eustonite or a left Zionist of a variety not dissimilar to the AWL. Some of Cutrone's analysis of Middle East politics shows signs, like the AWL's analysis, of being taken from the overseas outlets of Tel Aviv. Louis Proyect argues that Cutrone's language (and that of other Platypus writers) is, rather than Delphic, Aesopian: obscure, and contains code which actually signals private (here Eustonite or AWLish) commitments.

A number of Platypus supporters responded to Proyect's posting. They took the opportunity to assert their critique of the left. They insisted that *Platypus Review* is an open magazine and - as Spencer Leonard said in the closing plenary at the convention - that Platypus does not have a line. They said that they *do not support* 'humanitarian interventions' - which is the code also used by the AWL. But they did not take the opportunity to say upfront that they as a group or as individuals *oppose* these 'sanctions' and military actions - still less that they would campaign to stop them, even at the level of publishing anti-war or anti-sanctions material in *Platypus Review*.

Cutrone's address to the convention - on 'The anti-fascist v anti-imperialist "left": some genealogies and prospects' - *may* have signalled a change in direction. I do not know because I missed the speech and he has not (yet) put it up on his blog.

In the absence of a shift, the problem is that the *balance* of the *Platypus Review's* coverage is AWLish. It is not strictly Eustonite, since it does not openly support 'wars for democracy'. But it uses the same sort of 'how can we condemn' evasions as AWL leader Sean Matgamna. If anything, it is to the right of the Matgamnaites, who do have practical commitments in the British workers' movement and a willingness to attempt to project a (defective) line for concrete support for independent working class politics in the Middle East.

Remember that I have not said anything more than that the absence of opposition to the global hierarchy of countries is as much an abandonment of the project of general human emancipation as is the 'anti-imperialism of idiots' that gives political support to local reaction and authoritarianism as offering in some way an alternative to the global hierarchy. I have not asserted Lenin's or any other theory of imperialism. It is merely that both Platypus's *claim* not to have a political line and its *claim* to represent a reassertion of the emancipatory project of Marxism are belied by the one-sided character of *Platypus Review's* coverage of these issues.

It would, of course, be possible to

maintain a pro-imperialist or neutral line if Platypus were willing to abandon the critique of the existing left as anti-emancipatory. All that would be needed would be to assert that the *immediate* general emancipation of humanity is impossible and that it is first necessary to pass through capitalism *via* imperialism. Platypus is a third of the way to this position, since it asserts that emancipation has to be built on the basis of the conquests of capitalism. Step two is to assert that the material or 'objective' conditions for socialist revolution had not matured as of 1917 (or 1938). This point has been clearly argued by Moshé Machover in 1999,³ and, from within the 'Lukácsian' tradition to which Platypus adheres, by István Mészáros, in *Beyond capital* (1995). Platypus seems (from what Richard Rubin said in the Trotsky plenary) to reject it.

Step three would be to argue that objective conditions *have not yet* matured; that their maturing involves the complete global displacement of pre-capitalist social relations; and that this can only be accomplished through the agency of imperialism. This would then be substantially the theory of Bill Warren's *Imperialism, pioneer of capitalism* (1980). It would also be the theory of Bernstein in the Bernstein-Bax debate of 1896-97 and of the 'social-imperialists' in the 1900s.⁴

Whatever its merits (I should emphasise that I think that beyond the second step the merits are negligible: see my 2004 series on imperialism⁵), this approach would involve abandoning Platypus's critique of the existing left as 'dead' because it has abandoned the emancipatory project of Marxism. The reason would be that such a theory would *also* deny the possibility of immediate general emancipation: it would say that the next step is full global capitalism and global liberalism, to make a *future* general emancipation possible.

The 'anti-imperialist' line which supports the targets of US attacks does not deny that *future* general emancipation is desirable: rather, it says that the next step on this road is general global *Stalinism and Stalinoid nationalism*, to make a future general emancipation possible. The difference between two such approaches can be no more than one of theoretical, empirical and practical plausibility, not one of moral repudiation of one's own moral premises.

Theory

In the Trotsky plenary at the Platypus convention, as I reported in last week's article, Richard Rubin of Platypus argued that both fascism and Stalinism resulted from the defeat of the German revolution; and that this 'German question' posed the question of how the strongest Marxist party in the world, the SPD, could betray its own revolution. Since the objective conditions for socialism had matured, the explanation had to be the power of bourgeois ideology, and both Trotsky and the Frankfurt school had grappled with this problem.

This outline narrative has two huge gaps. The first is the basis of the 'crisis of Marxism'. The second is the explanation of the problem of the 1914 betrayal *actually offered* by Lenin, the Comintern and Trotsky, which is not the power of ideology, but the effects of imperialism.

Marxism is distinct from pre-

Marxist socialisms and communisms in a very simple way: that it asserts that communism is not a simple act of moral will, but reflects the objective interests of the proletariat in the class conflict inherent in capitalism, so that the proletariat as a class can be expected at the end of the day to become (in broad terms) communist. It is thus the role of the proletariat which produces the result that for Marxists capitalism is the necessary precursor of communism.

Mass working class support for forms of reformism and gradualism, or - as in England before 1900 or the USA today - for capitalist parties, is generally taken to be the basis of the 'crisis of Marxism'. This is because it calls into question the claim that the class struggle between capital and proletariat forms a material basis for communism. Communism then reverts to being an ethical imperative, to be approached through moral persuasion on a cross-class basis or through one or another form of voluntarist minority action - or rejected.

In 1917-19 and again in 1943-48 this 'crisis of Marxism' argument was utterly implausible.⁶ But in the period of stability and prosperity in the 1890s-1900s, and the returned stability and prosperity of the 1950s-60s - and also in a sense especially since the fall of the USSR - it has again become attractive.⁷

I have argued in *Revolutionary strategy* (chapter 2) that there are both positive and negative empirical grounds for defending the Marxist conception today in spite of the overall negative evolution since the 1970s. Marc Mulholland in two articles published in *Critique* in 2009 and 2010 has offered much more elaborated theoretical reasons for supposing a proletarian will to collectivism.⁸

The actual explanation of the betrayal of August 1914 offered at the time independently by Lenin and Zinoviev, and by Trotsky, was the effects of imperialism on the working class of the imperialist countries and its organisations: that is, that a section of the class was 'bought off' by the spoils of imperialism.⁹ Trotsky continued to defend this view down to his death.¹⁰ Bukharin's *Imperialism and world economy* took a slightly different angle, seeing the working class movement as tied to the capitalists through concessions organised by the imperialist state.¹¹ Herman Gorter's *Imperialism, the World War and social democracy* (1914) had aspects of both the Bukharin view and Luxemburg's arguments (below).¹²

Now this view may be right or it may be wrong, but it is not just Maoism or 'New Left'-ism. It is the product precisely of some of the 'classical Marxists' or 'second International lefts', whose legacy Platypus says it is concerned to redeem in order to enable a 21st century left to be reborn. It demands a precise and serious critique, which cannot be undertaken just on the basis of the modern Maoist caricature of it and the Trotskyist imitators of Maoism.

I have argued elsewhere that the Lenin-Zinoviev and Trotsky version of this analysis in terms of imperialism buying off top sections of the working class is false, but the Bukharin version is broadly correct, and can be extended to understand the existence of reformism and dominance of nationalism in the modern 'third world'.¹³

One of the 'second International lefts', of course, did not adopt this line. It is Luxemburg, not Trotsky, who offered a really 'accidental' explanation of the political collapse of the SPD - and hence of the epoch - in terms of Kautsky's (alleged) theoretical gradualism and did not attempt to ground this characterisation in any material process of change.¹⁴ In this Luxemburg, as against Lenin and Trotsky, is followed by Korsch in

Marxism and philosophy.¹⁵

This line genuinely does imply that - as Richard Rubin argued - the failure of the German revolution has to be explained by the power of bourgeois ideology, or of alienation, reification and commodity fetishism. This sort of argument and not Lenin (except in an extremely dematerialised form) or Trotsky is the context of Lukács's *History and class consciousness*. The next step is that taken by the Frankfurt school people: to attempt to integrate alienation, reification and commodity fetishism with Freudian psychoanalysis. In other words, we arrive at the salience of the Frankfurt school for theory by rejecting the salience of imperialism in the explanation of the political collapse of the Second International.

But there is a theoretical as well as a political price to be paid for this choice. I have written on the political price or prices before: the explanation of reformism by the self-reproduction of capitalist order provides a theory which demands both an 'actionism', which is either ultra-left or opportunist or both, and the epistemological commitments that support the form of the small bureaucratic-centralist sect.¹⁶ In the specific case of the Frankfurt school the upshot is just a politics of despair. But Platypus in a sense embraces both the politics of despair and the need for critique (*il faut cultiver son jardin théorique*), so these points are secondary.

The theoretical price is the expulsion of history from theory. This may seem a paradoxical statement, since all the variants derived under Lukácsian and similar interpretations - including, for example, Postone - insist that theory must be historicised and that transhistorical claims about human nature, etc must be expelled from Marx (or foisted on Engels) to achieve a properly historicised theory. That means one which focuses purely on the critique of capitalist modernity.

To take this turn, however, is to prohibit actual comprehension. It is like asking for drug therapy or surgery to remove your long-term memory in the hope that it will get rid of 'distractions' from the present. In reality, no such focus on capitalist modernity is possible: 'the pre-modern' remains as a silent other, albeit in a mutilated form, against which 'capitalist modernity' is identified. In reality, our ability to identify change depends on recognising also continuities. So the expulsion of the longer-term history of which capitalism is part results in a loss of vision of change within capitalism.¹⁷

It turns out, indeed, that to defend this scheme of 'historicised' theory, it is necessary to falsify the very local history of the enlightenment, Marxism and the workers' movement (examples in last week's article). Even if the students who form Platypus's base do not have political but only theoretical aims, they will find that this scheme is a theoretical trap. What will be driven to fill the 'absence' of the 'transhistorical' is either some form of liberalism - or, as in Alasdair MacIntyre, Thomas Aquinas.¹⁸

Classifying the Platypus

Platypus takes its name from an anecdote about Engels:

"A story is told about Karl Marx's collaborator and friend, Friedrich Engels, who, in his youth, as a good Hegelian idealist, sure about the purposeful, rational evolution of nature and of the place of human reason in it, became indignant when reading about a platypus, which he supposed to be a fraud perpetrated by English taxidermists. For Engels, the platypus made no sense in natural history.

"Later, Engels saw a living platypus

at a British zoo and was chagrined. Like Marx a good materialist, and a thinker receptive to Darwin's theory of evolution, which dethroned a human-centred view of nature, Engels came to respect that 'reason' in history, natural or otherwise, must not necessarily accord with present standards of human reason.

"This is a parable we find salutary to understanding the condition of the left today."¹⁹

The Engels story is an embroidered version of one Engels told about himself in a letter to Conrad Schmidt in 1895, for a purpose rather different to that which the group Platypus uses it. Schmidt had (as can be seen from Engels' letter) raised empirical objections to the idea of the general rate of profit in volume 3 of Marx's *Capital*, and therefore wished to "degrade the law of value to a fiction".

Engels' response is that direct empirical confirmation or disconfirmation of individual concepts is not to be expected. After other examples, Engels comes to that of concepts in biology and the platypus:

"From the moment we accept the theory of evolution all our concepts of organic life correspond only approximately to reality. Otherwise there would be no change: on the day when concepts and reality completely coincide in the organic world development comes to an end ... How, without bringing one or both concepts into conflict with reality are you going to get from the egg-laying reptile to the mammal, which gives birth to living young? And in reality we have in the monotremata a whole sub-class of egg-laying mammals: in 1843, I saw the eggs of the duck-bill in Manchester and with arrogant narrow-mindedness mocked at such stupidity - as if a mammal could lay eggs - and now it has been proved! So do not behave to the conceptions of value in the way I had later to beg the duck-bill's pardon for!"²⁰

The merits or otherwise of Engels' arguments as a matter of philosophy are violently debatable.²¹ But it should be clear that Engels' point is not, contrary to Platypus, "that 'reason' in history, natural or otherwise, must not necessarily accord with present standards of human reason", but a considerably narrower philosophical point: that concepts are necessarily in imperfect agreement with the perceptible world.

The 'conceptual difficulty' with the platypus, of course, is that it and other monotremes are animals somewhere in the borderlands between, or overlapping, the taxonomical classes of birds or reptiles, which lay eggs, and mammals, which give birth and suckle their young. It is, however, in modern times regarded, for reasons of evolutionary-history analysis, as a type of mammal.

In this sense, if not in the sense of an existent impossibility, the Platypus Affiliated Society is rightly named. It is a group somewhere in the borderlands between, or overlapping, two sorts of left.

The first is the political-activist left: groups from Labour leftwards in this country, from the left wing of the Democrats leftwards in the US. This left consists primarily of organised parties and groups, secondarily of 'independents' (or sects of one member) who participate in left, broad-front campaigns and other initiatives. It is linked, even if imperfectly, to the broader workers' movement (trade unions, cooperatives, mass workers' parties), and attempts to intervene in public politics in pursuit of definite short-term and long-term goals, usually expressed through a public press.

The second is the academic left: academics who would regard themselves as 'being of the left' in relation to their academic work. (This is not the same thing as working

in a university, while being either a militant and political trade unionist or, outside of work, involved in the political-activist left.) This left consists primarily of individual academics, linked together by leftist academic journals, annual conferences and similar events. To the extent that it intervenes in public politics it does so by individual attempts to act as 'public intellectuals' through contributions to the capitalist media.

The Platypus Affiliated Society looks from one angle like an organisation of the political activist left; from another angle like a part of the academic left. At present, judging from its convention, it should probably be located, in spite of the ambiguities, on the academic side of the divide. Apart from the Saturday morning workshops on left groups, the format was that of an academic conference (papers, 'respondents', short Q&A sessions), not that of a political conference. The Frankfurt school commitments, the denial of the possibility of political action as such and the obscurely AWLish line on the 'war on terror' all give Platypus some degree of academic credibility.

It is therefore to be judged as a theoretical project, more than as a political project. My judgement is that, though the group is right that the 'anti-imperialist front' and the rest of the orthodoxy of the left is a dead end, Platypus's theoretical project is also a dead end as theory ●

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Notes

1. 'No need for party?', May 12.
2. <http://louisproject.wordpress.com/2010/04/25/q-what-is-a-platypus-a-an-american-eunistite>.
3. M Machover, 'The 20th century in retrospect' *Workers' Liberty* No59, 1999; www.matzpen.org/index.asp?u=101&p=20th; Machover's email exchange with Dov Schoss, linked at the end of that page, is also useful on the issues involved.
4. Bernstein-Bax debate in H Tudor and JM Tudor (eds) *Marxism and social democracy: the revisionist debate 1896-98* (Cambridge 1998) chapter 2. Later social-imperialists: the targets of Kautsky's polemics in *Socialism and colonial policy* (1907): www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1907/colonial/index.htm.
5. The original series with critiques and a response: *Weekly Worker* July 29-September 23 2004.
6. 1919: A Read *The world on fire: 1919 and the battle with Bolshevism* London 2008, albeit from a rightwing perspective. Any general history will

indicate the sheer extent of working class collectivism in 1943-48.

7. Postone's argument in *Time, labour and social domination* (Cambridge 1993) is at the end of the day a variant of it: "the working class is integral to capitalism rather than the embodiment of its negation" (emphasis added, p17). For Marx, as opposed to Postone, the working class was both integral to capitalism and the embodiment of its negation.

8. 'Marx, the proletariat and the "will to socialism"' (2009) 37 *Critique* pp319-43; "Its patrimony, its unique wealth!" Labour-power, working class consciousness and crises' (2010) 38 *Critique* pp375-417. Comrade Mulholland is not a CPGB supporter and is, obviously, not responsible for any use I may make of his argument.

9. VI Lenin *Socialism and war* (1915) chapter 1: www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/s-w/ch01.htm#v21f70h-299. *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*, having been written with a view to the tsarist censorship, is less explicit. L Trotsky *War and the International* (1914) chapter 10: www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1914/war/part3.htm#ch10.

10. *Where is Britain going?* (1925) chapter 5: www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/britain/wibg/ch05.htm; *Their morals and ours* (1938): www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/morals/morals.htm.

11. www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1917/imperial/14.htm.

12. www.marxists.org/archive/gorter/1914/imperialism.htm.

13. *Revolutionary strategy* pp87-89; 'Labour Party blues' *Weekly Worker* July 23 2009.

14. Visible in the *Junius pamphlet* (1915): www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/index.htm.

15. www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm. So too Pannekoek in 'Marxism as action' (1915): www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1915/marxism-action.htm, though his 'The third international' (1917, www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1917/thirdinter.htm) is closer to the Lenin and Zinoviev-Trotsky-Bukharin line.

16. *Weekly Worker* articles, 'Hegelian pitfalls', July 21 2003; 'Classical Marxism and grasping the dialectic', September 4 2003; 'Spontaneity and Marxist theory', September 6 2007; 'Against philosopher-kings', December 11 2008.

17. This is, incidentally, my reason for believing that the theory of sexuality Jamie Gough and I defended in outline in 1985 has more explanatory power than Pablo Ben's 'Frankfurt' version. Because our account begins with matters prior to capitalism and their persistence within capitalism, it also grasps more fully the transformations of sexualities within capitalist development over the last three centuries.

18. Cf my 'Sects and "new left" disillusionment' *Weekly Worker* April 15 2010.

19. <http://platypus1917.org/about/what-is-a-platypus>.

20. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1895/letters/95_03_12.htm.

21. Eg, Louis Althusser in *Reading 'Capital'* (online at <http://readingcapital.blogspot.com/2007/02/marx-and-his-discoveries.html>) gives the letter to Schmidt as an example of Engels' "empiricism" and departure from Marx; contra J Rees, 'Engels' Marxism' *International Socialism* 1994, No65: <http://pubs.socialiststudiesindex.org.uk/isj65/rees.htm>; cf also H Putnam *Mind, language and reality* (Cambridge 1979) chapter 11.

Fighting fund

A few coppers

Home secretary Theresa May is very understanding. She told delegates to the Police Federation annual conference on May 18 that she could see why they were "worried" about cuts. Some officers could see their pay drop by £4,000 a year, after all.

But the Conservatives are nothing if not even-handed - we are all in it together, you see, and so even the "finest police officers in the world" cannot be exempt from the suffering - which is so necessary for the good of the country. Perhaps this shows a degree of complacency, though. If they thought the mass of workers were about to rise up against the general austerity assault, the Con-Dems might think it a good idea to keep the police onside.

I don't suppose there are many *Weekly Worker* supporters among the police. And I would suspect most of our readers take home rather less than an officer's salary - a constable with a few years service will gross £40,000. On the other hand, many of our readers are driven by rather different imperatives than the average

bobby. They are motivated by a political vision and are happy to support financially a paper that points to the kind of organisation we need in order to make it a reality.

Among them this week was MM, whose monthly standing order for £70 is always gratefully received - as is the £60 in total from other SO donors over the last seven days. Then there were those comrades who contributed online - thanks to JR (a brilliant £50), DV and PY (£20 each) and RP (£10). They were among 11,457 internet readers last week.

Thanks also to KC (£25), LG (£20) and LD, who added £10 to his subscription. All that comes to £285, which takes our fighting fund total for May to £716. But we are still quite a way off the £1,250 we need. Can you spare a few coppers - even if you're one yourself?

Robbie Rix

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to *Weekly Worker*

LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

Voting tactics

It is a pity that comrade Chris Trafford, in defending the open letter calling for no vote to George Galloway on May 5, did not engage with the actual position of the CPGB of which he is a member.

He writes: "The worst of the attacks on the open letter is the hysterical claim that the 30 or so comrades who signed it are promoting a social-imperialist line... they are shamefully smeared as social-imperialists and accused of backing Alliance for Workers' Liberty-type political attacks on Galloway" (Letters, May 19). It would be shameful and even hysterical if it were true that the signatories had been attacked as social-imperialists. But who has done that? Certainly not the CPGB.

It is also a pity that comrade Trafford did not attend the May 8 CPGB members' aggregate, which debated and unanimously agreed a resolution on the open letter. Chris does not appear to have read this resolution, which, far from writing off the signatories as social-imperialists, recognises their motivation as that of "legitimate disgust at Galloway's support for and organised links to the tyrannical theocratic regime in Iran". However, "in focussing solely" on Galloway, the open letter did not clearly oppose "the operations of the imperialists" and therefore "risks associating" members of Hands Off the People of Iran and Communist Students who signed the letter "with the Eustonite/Alliance for Workers' Liberty camp". It was for this reason first and foremost that the open letter was a "political mistake" ('Aggregate resolution', May 12).

While the signatories were not motivated by social-imperialism, it is in fact the case that the open letter had all the appearances of an 'AWL-type political attack on Galloway'. It is *exactly* the style of the AWL to one-sidedly focus on the failings of a single left candidate and to claim that this made him uniquely unsupportable, while saying not a word about the failings of any other left candidate. No wonder the AWL reproduced the open letter on its website. The very fact that this occurred should have made comrade Trafford stop and think.

He implies that the *Weekly Worker's* support for Galloway was not really "critical" - we failed to expose his "awful politics and links with the Iranian regime... for this election". In reality we did not actually give him - or any other left candidate - much support (in the way, say, that *The Socialist* campaigned week after week for the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition). We published just two articles before the election explaining our attitude and in both we gave equal space to condemning Galloway's links to the Iran regime as to explaining why he should be supported nevertheless.

We did not place "extra conditions" on the Scottish Socialist Party and Socialist Labour Party by recommending a vote for Galloway's Coalition Against Cuts in Glasgow rather than them. We made it clear that all three met our conditions for support for working class anti-cuts candidates. Despite their obvious failings, the election of any of their lead candidates would have resulted in a small advance for the working class cause. All three would have provided some kind of working class voice against the cuts (as well as against imperialist wars, etc). But workers obviously could not vote for all of them, and only Galloway had any chance of being elected (and at

least his campaign could be seen as part of the Britain-wide working class resistance rather than the Scottish separatism of the SSP). Elsewhere in Scotland there was no point in suggesting which of the three no-hope sectarian campaigns (SSP, SLP, Solidarity) were more worthy of working class votes than their rivals.

It is unfortunate that Chris Trafford accuses CPGB comrades like Jack Conrad of telling "a lie" for stating that Galloway's backing for the Iran regime is similar to the support for Stalinist regimes offered by 'official communists' or the Workers Revolutionary Party for Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In my view all have been truly nauseating and should equally be condemned, and it is rather uncomradely of Chris to accuse his fellow CPGBers of lying for disagreeing with him on this. Personally I think his assertion that "Galloway is a conscious cog in the machine of terror directed at the Iranian people" is an absurd exaggeration (you might just as well accuse Paul Mason of *Newsnight* of being a similar "cog in the machine of terror" of British imperialism). But I do not accuse comrade Trafford of lying for making it.

Finally, let me point out to comrade Trafford the nature of electoral tactics. This means that working class internationalists able to contest an election in Tehran would highlight different aspects of their programme than those contesting in Glasgow. In Tehran their main focus would be the repressive regime, I would suggest, while in Glasgow it would be the cuts, not to mention anti-imperialism. In Iran genuine communists would perhaps give critical support to any working class candidate who demanded the end of the regime, irrespective of serious failings and weaknesses, such as support for austerity measures, for instance.

Contradictory? No. When our class is weak we try to build support for our side by focussing on the key dividing lines, while refusing to be diverted by issues, however important, that are secondary at a given time or place.

Peter Manson
South London

Big lesson

Mike Macnair has pointed out that "there is very little in Marx's and Engels' writings on electoral tactics" ('Propaganda and agitation', April 28). He went on: "Engels says that Keir Hardie 'publicly declares that [Irish nationalist Charles Stewart] Parnell's experiment, which compelled Gladstone to give in, ought to be repeated at the next election and, where it is impossible to nominate a Labour candidate, one should vote for the Conservatives, in order to show the Liberals the power of the party. Now this is a policy which under definite circumstances I myself recommended to the English..."

This is a massive revelation - that Engels actually supported a vote for the Tories under certain circumstances! The biggest lesson to draw is that electoral strategy and tactics that are correct at one time may not be correct at another.

I was a member of the Militant Tendency, now the Socialist Party, from 1990 to 1998. I fully supported the Scottish turn, establishing Scottish Militant Labour, which was an extremely successful strategy leading to Tommy Sheridan getting elected from his prison cell (for defying the poll tax) to Glasgow city council in 1992. This led on to a few more electoral victories for SML, the establishment of the Scottish Socialist Alliance and the later formation of the SSP.

I left the Socialist Party when it

failed to support the establishment of the SSP in 1998. The SSP was a very successful project, winning one seat (Sheridan's) in 1999 and six seats in 2003. Contrary to how it is expressed in the *Weekly Worker*, this was not a failure, despite the disintegration of the SSP after the Sheridan affair.

The best tactics to adopt now are very different - there is a need for a Scottish Revolutionary Socialist Party, as well as a broad socialist party like the SSP and Solidarity. Revolutionary platforms of broad socialist parties, including Labour, would also be a massive step forward.

Steve Wallis
email

Fat chance

I learnt a great deal when I attended the Lambeth People's Assembly, organised by Lambeth Save Our Services on Saturday May 21. I heard inspiring contributions from campaigners and trade unionists fighting to retain local services and opposing privatisation and job losses, students learning that their courses will not be continuing the following year, librarians seeking to save reading groups, tenants fighting privatisation and disabled people campaigning to save transport services.

It was a privilege hearing from, Kingsley Abrams, who I understand is the only Labour councillor in London to oppose the cuts to services. For his pains, he has only just been re-admitted to the Labour group on the council. However, his stay is likely to be short-lived, as he pledged to oppose the further waves of cuts and closures planned.

Ted Knight, the former leader of Lambeth council in the 1980s, outlined that the Labour Party should not be meekly going along with the government's savage cuts, but should be working with campaigners and trade unionists and leading the fight to defend jobs and services. Fat chance!

A political campaign across London is needed and the Greater London assembly elections next year will give all those who oppose the cuts an opportunity to register a protest. The Labour Party have abandoned their history of defending the weak and those reliant on council services. This duty must now fall on others.

Lewisham People Before Profit are keen to talk with all those fighting the cuts to services and would like to explore contesting the GLA elections with others.

Nick Long
Nominating officer, Lewisham PBP

PCS conference

Despite Dave Vincent's effort in the *Weekly Worker* to lobby against the Public and Commercial Services union balloting for strike action on June 30 alongside other unions, only two out of over 900 delegates voted against the leadership's plans ('Don't rush - make sure we can win', May 12). Funnily enough, even comrade Vincent voted *for* the motion in the end - despite speaking against it and calling for more patience. Comrade Vincent had been persuaded by conference.

While voting for the motion, I - like many other PCS activists - would criticise the June 30 action from a very different angle: if we are serious about defeating the vicious plans of this Con-Dem government, we need to do much more than call one-day strikes. These are good enough as a 'vote of protest', but not much more than that. The government can easily ride out one-day strikes (even if another larger one follows, as planned, in October).

True, longer strikes might currently see a lower turnout. This has partly to do with the general low confidence and activity of the working class,

but also a lack of confidence in the PCS leadership, which for the last 10 years has been run like a fiefdom by the Socialist Party.

Most members, whilst loyal to their union, don't actually believe that the leadership have a strategy to defeat the attacks (which will lead to hundreds of thousands of jobs being lost in the public sector, working conditions further undermined and pension provisions cut). As comrade Vincent reports, the turnout for the NEC elections was just over 10% - though many more members will turn out for strike action. The leadership seems almost paralysed by this low turnout. Because they fear they can't convince members of more militant action, they don't even try. Plus, over the 10 years they have been running the union, they have failed to build up a decent strike fund that could actually finance more long-term action.

In my opinion we need to become much more ambitious in this period. Instead of simply mobilising the whole PCS membership for one-day strikes every few months, it would be much better to organise more targeted and militant strike action alongside it.

For example, could you imagine the damage caused if workers in customs and excise went on indefinite strike? Or if tax collectors refused to work, starving the government of vital income? This would hit them where it hurts. Despite general secretary Mark Serwotka recently saying that "no tactics are off the agenda", this kind of action is unlikely to be called by the SP-dominated NEC.

Unfortunately, the emergency motion on Iran was not heard. The standing orders committee did not regard it as worthy of a conference motion and therefore 'D-marked' it as something that could be dealt with by correspondence. As a delegate I did get the opportunity to speak for the motion by challenging the decision by way of a reference back. But this was only supported by about 80 delegates and so the motion - which opposed all imperialist military action and sanctions, and called for support for the new campaign, 'Freedom for Jafar Panahi and all political prisoners' - did not get onto the main agenda.

Lee Rock
Sheffield

Fish nor fowl

I wish to respond to the characterisation of Platypus, politically, as having affinities with the anti-'anti-imperialist' left, such as the Alliance for Workers' Liberty *et al.* ('Theoretical dead end', May 19). However we have been influenced theoretically by aspects of Moishe Postone's work on Marx's critique of capital, we are not in political agreement.

Platypus, which has been motivated by the diagnosis that the 'left is dead', originated in the era of the anti-war movement of the Bush II years, and our project of "hosting the critical conversation on the left", that we didn't think would otherwise take place, was necessitated by the predictable failure of the anti-war movement, of which we thought its supposed 'anti-imperialism' was the Achilles' heel. We wanted a more effective anti-war and anti-imperialist politics.

In considering the problems of the 'left' today, we discern that they are two-sided, embodied by not only the 'anti-imperialist' left of the US International Socialist Organization *et al.*, but also by the 'anti-fascist' left of Christopher Hitchens, Kanan Makiya *et al.* We consider not only Tariq Ali, but also Hitchens, to be important exemplars of today's 'dead left'. We consider the ISO-US *et al.* to be sham anti-imperialist, or pseudo-left, just

as we would consider Hitchens's claims to be anti-fascist in supporting US imperialism to be pseudo-left (pseudo-liberal).

We take seriously Fred Halliday's characterisation, reported in his interview with Danny Postel ('Who is responsible?' in *Salmagundi* No150-51, 2006, pp 221-240) of his political departure from *New Left Review* and Tariq Ali, as follows: "About 20 years ago I said to Tariq that god, allah, called the two of us to his presence and said to us, 'One of you is to go to the left, and one of you is to go to the right.' The problem is, He didn't tell us which was which, and maybe he didn't know himself. And Tariq laughed. He understood exactly what I was saying, and he didn't dispute it."

We interpret this to mean that both Halliday and Ali turned to the right, or that both are disintegrated (or decomposed) remnants of the death of the left and therefore worth critical consideration. And not only Halliday, but also the aforementioned Hitchens and Makiya, could legitimately claim that they didn't abandon the left so much as the left abandoned them.

The ideal conversation we in Platypus would like to have hosted, when we first launched our project, would have been a debate on the 'war on terror' between Tariq Ali, Alex Callinicos, Halliday, Hitchens and Makiya (with perhaps Slavoj Žižek thrown in for fun). In such a debate, we don't think anyone would have represented the left that the world needs today - hence the need for such a conversation. For we think that they are all wrong and, hence, all 'right'. As a project, Platypus is about exposing and putting forward a need: the present absence of a true left. We don't have answers, only questions.

On the issue of 'imperialism', I dispute the supposed distinction of a voluntaristic (or opportunist) versus structural-historical approach to the problem of, eg, Luxemburg versus Bukharin. I think that Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky found that the 'imperialist' phase of 'monopoly capital' and the changing 'organic composition of capital' (at a global scale) by the turn of the 20th century had been the product of the successes of the workers' movement in the core capitalist countries. They found this success to have advanced the crisis of capital. In other words, the social democratic workers' movement had itself brought about the crisis of capital, or 'imperialism' as capitalism's 'highest' or last stage (Lenin): that is, the eve of revolution. Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky thought that the socialist workers' movement was part of and not extrinsic to the history of capital. This meant, for Luxemburg, that the workers were responsible for the world war and thus historically obligated to bring about socialism and avert barbarism. This was not merely a moral injunction.

Moreover, what the Second International radicals meant by 'imperialism' was inter-imperialism, not core-periphery relations. The emphasis on the latter was the hallmark of the post-World War II new left and its derangement on the problem of global capital in history.

So it is not, for us, a matter of waiting for the world to become entirely liberalised or uniformly bourgeois in social relations before the struggle for socialism can commence (which would indeed be like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*), but rather recognition that the problem of 'imperialism' has been a symptom of capital's historical over-ripeness for revolution, at least since 1914-19, if not significantly long before.

When Platypus says that the 'left is dead', what we mean is that the rottenness of the world today is the

historical legacy and responsibility of the left (and the failure of Marxism). As a project, we are neither 'academic' nor 'activist' (neither fish nor fowl), but rather about provoking recognition (blocked by both academicism and activism) of this long overdue and festering task, which we think is found in historical Marxism, but buried under many layers of regressive obfuscation from which it needs to be disinterred.

We don't think that this task can be formulated straightforwardly politically, programmatically, but only indirectly, through pointed and acutely symptomatic conversation that can have a transformative effect ideologically. This will not involve Platypus developing some better theory ahead of better practice, but rather our doing something that will need to be accompanied, in a 'division of labour', by a reinvigorated workers' movement. We think the ideological work we are doing in hosting and pointedly curating the conversation can have an effect, however indirectly, on freeing up and potentially revalorising the idea of socialism and a Marxist approach that we think would be necessary - if for now at some distance from immediately practical questions - for such a workers' movement.

Christopher Cutrone
email

Lost grip

In place of a socialist understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Tony Greenstein once again offers his Arabesque/Islamist narrative in accord with his published ambition to see the "destruction of the state of Israel" ('Re-enacting Nakba crimes', May 19).

In order to delegitimise and demonise Israel, the only democratic state in the Middle East, and support the idea of a unitary Palestinian state, Mr Greenstein uses analogues reasoning and decontextualises history, whilst at the same time arguing as if the Palestinians are the victims and the Jews the persecutors. Worse and morally repugnant are the simplistic parallels between Nazi-fascism and the Israeli state - false and morally suspect. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and minister Ehard Barak, we are told, "have been responsible for the murder of thousands of Palestinians", in a comparison with Libya's Gaddafi who, if caught, will be held to account for the use of the military against his own countrymen during the recent revolt for democratic rights. But Israel on May 15 was defending itself against 'a protest of rage', another violent 'intifada', which was designed to incite an attack against Israel. Thus the analogy is clearly false: Israeli Arabs have human rights and the vote and are not comparable with those Arabs in revolt against Arab dictatorships.

In this respect, Netanyahu and Barak are not 'murderers', but defending the state of Israel; just as any democratic state is entitled to defend itself, (and the Israel Defence Forces have as good a record as any progressive nation for their policy of trying to avoid non-combatant fatalities). Greenstein's repeated attempts to make Israel equivalent to Arab dictatorships are simply false, arriving at the notion that the Arab regimes and even Iran "are Israel's reliable collaborators and allies" - stretching the imagination, to say the least. Moreover, we are led to believe that the BBC is a Zionist organisation (world conspiracy of Jews?) whose director is plotting against the Palestinians.

Greenstein is losing his grip. The fact that many trade unions and student unions have started boycotts and advocated the closing down of Israeli/Jewish stores and shops in Europe is largely due to the way in which the left has singled out Israel

for delegitimation and demonisation. Many states with demonstrably worse human rights records simply don't register with the left, whilst the left often supports Islamic terrorist organisations and Arab dictatorships. The singling out of Israel for unfair attack has demonstrably anti-Semitic undertones (shutting down Israeli/Jewish stores were Nazi-fascist tactics).

The notion that Israel is the "only colonial settler-state left in the world" forgets the real context of the continuous historical connection of the Jewish people with Israel and the legitimate creation of Israel in 1948. Thus the Islamist notion of the 'Nakba' or 'catastrophe' - used as analogous to the holocaust - is a lie and an insult to every victim of Nazi-fascism persecution and aggression.

Benny Morris, the Israeli historian, has shown that viewing the Palestinians as victims is too simplistic and the historical context does not support Greenstein's Islamist narrative. But this does not satisfy Greenstein's position and so he enlists the idea that Morris is a "Judeo-Nazi". It is, of course, a far more complex picture than can be dealt with in a letter, but suffice to conclude that Mr Greenstein's miseducates and misleads many socialists and communists today, especially the younger generation, who are fed into the arms of Islamists and away from a peaceful and just two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Henry Mitchell
London

Stolen land

On Nakba Day, May 15, I participated in a demonstration in the north of Israel, 14 kilometres from the Lebanese border. We were a group of about 400 who tried to reach the border with Lebanon, but we were forced to stop by the police. We were allowed to demonstrate for one hour, but then the police tear-gassed us. Around 10 of us suffered very badly following this attack and 22 were arrested. However, compared to other Palestinians and the few Jews who participated in the demonstrations in the Golan Heights, Ras Maroun in Lebanon and Gaza, the price we paid for the right to demonstrate for the Palestinian refugees to return was negligible.

Israel is doing everything to erase the memory of the Nakba. It has removed mention of the fact from its rewritten official history books and a bill proposed by the rightwing Yisrael Beiteinu party stipulates fines for local authorities and other state-funded bodies for simply holding events marking the Palestinian Nakba Day.

Another bill, which succeeded by a majority of 35 to 20, formalises the establishment of admission committees to review the position of potential residents of Negev and Galilee communities that have fewer than 400 families. After its passing there were skirmishes in the kneset, as Ahmed Tibi, member of the kneset for the United Arab List-Ta'al, was not content to compare the bill to South African apartheid legislation, but likened its context to the Wannsee conference, where the Nazis decided on the 'final solution' in 1942.

However, following the May 15 demonstrations and the cold-blood murder of Palestinian protesters, the name 'Nakba' is becoming familiar for many people around the world.

If anyone had any doubt as to the class nature of the Egyptian army, the events in Tahrir Square on Nakba Day showed the real face of the generals. At least 120 people were injured, when security forces fired tear gas and rubber-coated steel bullets at pro-Palestinian protesters who were trying to storm the Israeli embassy. At least 20 people were arrested.

Protesters responded by burning tyres and throwing stones.

This incident followed the visit to Egypt by Amos Gilad, a senior Israeli defence ministry official - the first trip by a top Israeli official since the revolution that toppled former president Hosni Mubarak in February. Clearly, just as in Mubarak's days, the Egyptian army is allying itself with Israel and oppressing the Palestinians. This army has to go, to be replaced by a workers' army. For this it is necessary to split it along class lines. The new trade union federation and workers' party must organise workers' militias to defend, among others, the Palestinians and the Copts.

The incident also shed more light on the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah - struck under the auspices of the Egyptian generals - which aims at putting together an interim Palestinian government. While the reformists present this agreement as a step forward in the struggle against Israel, it is actually a step in the direction of the Oslo agreement.

The Nakba Day events have shown anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear that a key question of the so-called Israeli-Arab conflict is the Palestinian right of return. Netanyahu said that the Nakba Day protests were not about the 1967 borders, but rather about "undermining the very existence of Israel". He is right on that. The demonstrations were not for a mini-Palestinian state, with Israel still controlling 80% of Palestine. They were for the right of the refugees to return to their land. But if that were allowed, the majority of people living in this country would be Palestinians. For this reason Israel is prepared to kill thousands and thousands of Palestinians in an attempt to prevent such an outcome and, as long as Israel exists, the Palestinian refugees will not be able to return.

Yossi Schwartz
Internationalist Socialist League

19th century

I misunderstand Marx, argues Chris Gray (Letters, May 5). However, comrade Gray doesn't explain, even briefly, what this misunderstanding consists of.

Is Marx not associated with the view that production relations are determined by productive forces? Is this not the essence of the theory of historical materialism? Marx argues in *Capital* volume one that men enter into production relations independently of their will and these relations correspond to the degree of development of the productive forces. As I argued before, I believe this view is false, because exploitative production relations are imposed by one class on another using force, and this is backed up by ideology. For Marxism, exploitation was a necessary stage in the development of humanity. I do not think so and the existence of primitive communism refutes the Marxist thesis.

Chris wants to hear any counterevidence to the peak oil thesis. There is counterevidence aplenty in the writings of various free-market economists, who believe that the market will solve the problem. This literature is mostly delusional and hides the fact that the immediate problem is not the end of oil as such, but a decline in supply and the end of cheap oil.

The positive thing about Chris's letter is that, unlike most people on the left, he recognises the need for an urgent, informed debate on the issue. Most communists base themselves on Marxism, a 19th century doctrine which did not realise that the foundation of society is energy. That leads to Marxists underestimating the coming energy crisis.

Tony Clark
email

ACTION

CPGB podcasts

Every Monday we upload a podcast of commentary on the current political situation. In addition, the site features voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.podbean.com>.

Communist Students

For meetings in your area, contact info@communiststudents.org.uk or check out www.communiststudents.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Tuesdays, 6.45pm to 9pm, St Martin's Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (Camden tube).

May 31: 'Advanced lunarchy: implementing slow time'. Speaker: Chris Knight.

Stop the EDL

Saturday May 28, 12 noon: Vigil against English Defence League provocations, headland, south of Central Pier, Blackpool.

Organised by Blackpool and Fleetwood Unite Against Fascism: <http://blackpoolandfleetwooduaf.blogspot.com>.

Labour's socialist left

Northumberland LRC: Thursday June 2, 7pm, Ashington Football Club (near Wansbeck Hospital). 'How Labour turned left, how Labour turned right, how Labour begins to turn left again!' Speaker: John McCormack, UCU national committee and Ashington council leader.

Northern Region LRC: Saturday June 18, 11am, Gateshead Civic Centre, Blaydon room. 'The situation in Britain today'. Speaker: Peter Doyle (former Unison full-time official).

Organised by northern region Labour Representation Committee: northern.region.lrc@wilkobro.wanadoo.co.uk.

Miscarriages of justice

Thursday June 9, 11am: Protest - stop miscarriages of justice - free the innocent! Assemble New Canal Street, Digbeth, Birmingham B5 (opposite Old Curzon Street station) for march to CCRC offices.

Organised by West Midlands Against Injustice: westmidlandsagainstinjustice.webs.com.

Drop the charges

Thursday June 9, Friday June 10, 9am: Picket, magistrates court, 70 Horseferry Road, London SW1. Drop charges against protestors.

Organised by Defend the Right to Protest: <http://defendtherighttoprotest.org>.

No to academies

Saturday June 11, 10.30am to 4pm: Conference, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1.

Stop schools converting to academy status. Organised by Anti-Academies Alliance: www.antiacademies.org.uk.

Ten years on

Saturday June 11, 9.30am: Conference, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. 'Afghanistan and the war on terror 10 years on'. Speakers include: Tony Benn, George Galloway, Tariq Ali, Lindsey German, Military Families Against the War. Admission: £5 - book in advance.

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: office@stopwar.org.uk.

Cuba: 50 years

Saturday June 11, 9.30am-12.30pm: Annual general meeting, Cuba Solidarity Campaign, Hamilton House, London, WC1. Followed by anniversary event, 2pm to 4pm, with guest speakers from Cuba.

Organised by CSC: 020 8800 0155; office@cuba-solidarity.org.uk.

National Shop Stewards Network

Saturday June 11, 11.30am to 4pm: Annual conference, South Camden Community School, London NW1.

Organised by NSSN: www.shopstewards.net/conference.htm.

Remember Gaza

Sunday June 12, 6pm: Gaza Awareness Conference, Newcastle city centre (venue to be confirmed). Guests include Lowkey, Jody McIntyre, Yvonne Ridley. Proceeds to Ride to Gaza to provide kindergartens in Gaza refugee camps.

Organised by Ride to Gaza: www.ridetogaza.com

City of sanctuary

Wednesday, June 15, 6pm-8pm: Open event to keep Glasgow a place of sanctuary and solidarity, STUC, 333 Woodlands Road, Glasgow G3. Refreshments, crèche available (angela@gcin.org.uk).

Organised by Glasgow City of Sanctuary: www.cityofsanctuary.org.

Save Esol

Sunday June 19, 12.30pm: Demonstrations to save English for Speakers of Other Languages courses.

East London: Assemble Hackney town hall, Mare Street, London E8; or Stepney Green, Tower Hamlets, London E1 for march to Esol festival, Bethnal Green Gardens, London E3.

South London: Assemble Windrush Square, Brixton, London SW9 for march to Esol festival, Kennington Park, London SE11.

Organised by London Action for Esol: <http://actionforesol.org>.

Cuba solidarity

Tuesday June 21, 7pm: Ninth annual RMT garden party for Cuba, Maritime House, Old Town, Clapham, London SW4. With live Cuban band, food and bar.

Organised by Cuban Solidarity Campaign: 020 8800 0155.

Unite the resistance

Wednesday June 22, 6.30pm: Meeting, Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London NW1. Speakers include: Mark Serwotka, Kevin Courtney and Tony Benn.

Called by left union officials and promoted by Right to Work: <http://righttowork.org.uk/2011/05/unite-the-resistance>.

CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.