

12 Challenging the ideas of the status quo

Success in challenging and defeating those who hold economic and political power is conditional upon organisational skill and boldness. In addition – and crucially – it requires an outlook that distinguishes itself from traditional methods of thinking and ideas. Without this we struggle with one hand tied behind our back.

The capitalist class does not rule predominantly through the naked deployment of state force, except in the most extreme circumstances. A series of state institutions have emerged and evolved, that in one form or another reinforce and maintain the status quo of private property. Informing the work of all these power structures are systems of ideas and philosophies that together operate as conditioning agents, as the link between the rulers and the ruled.

Not only do the means of production – and what is produced – belong to a narrow group, but the output of dominant ideas and philosophies is equally in the hands of a minority. The use and manipulation of image and language have, in particular, taken on a key role in enhancing power in the period of globalisation.

Because the ideas that capitalism develops have a relative independence and life of their own, their source can prove difficult to identify. They make their appearance in the media, the education system, through marketing or in political philosophies and in the words of politicians. The dominant ideas

and outlooks find their way into social consciousness in an indirect fashion. For example, liberal newspapers may oppose aspects of capitalism like excessive executive pay or aggressive marketing of GM food.

Traditional politics seem to consist of disputes about policies or ideas that give the impression that there is a real struggle going on over vital issues. Concepts like “equality”, “justice” and “democracy” also have some significance for people in terms of their aspirations and possibilities for redress. The notion of freedom of expression also lends support to the claim that capitalism actually consists of a free interplay of ideas.

The overall effect is to restrict and narrow expectations, aspirations and horizons. Of course, these limits are in themselves limited in what they are capable of achieving. They may, for example, express an ideal of social harmony but as ideas in themselves they cannot succeed in abolishing objective class realities that divide society. New Labour may have announced the end of classes, for example, but they continue to exist in the real world.

Taken as a whole, however, the intended effect is to perpetuate the status quo by insisting that:

- ▶ the capitalist system has always existed and is the most natural thing
- ▶ there is no viable alternative to a society based on profit
- ▶ the destiny of the ruling class is to rule forever
- ▶ our fate is to work and be ruled
- ▶ revolutionary change is dangerous, brings anarchy and can never succeed.

The all-consuming ideology

Corporate globalisation has produced an all-pervasive, all-consuming ideology. A single view – that of the virtues of so-called free-market capitalism – now dominates to the virtual exclusion of all others in political and social consciousness. This ideology has incorporated into itself or obliterated what might have been considered oppositional outlooks that, while never challenging the fundamentals of the system, put forward

alternative ways of doing things. Views that challenge capitalism are brushed aside by politicians, the media and academics.

Take, for example, Anthony Giddens, the leading sociologist and former director of the London School of Economics. He became the self-appointed “theoretician” of the Third Way. This is the spurious New Labour theory that declares that class interests no longer apply and that the “old” divisions between capitalism and socialism are done with. Giddens wrote a whole book called *The Third Way*, which justifies the Blairite approach. In a defence of the status quo, he writes:

With the demise of socialism as a theory of economic management, one of the major division lines between left and right has disappeared, at least for the foreseeable future. The Marxist left wished to overthrow capitalism and replace it with a different system. Many social democrats also believed that capitalism could and should be progressively modified so that it would lose most of its defining characteristics. No one any longer has any alternatives to capitalism – the arguments that remain concern how far, and in what ways, capitalism should be governed and regulated.

So the end of history is announced from the LSE. There is no alternative to capitalism, the worthy professor declares. The media, too, is forthright in its appeal on behalf of capitalism. And it is not just the right-wing media. The liberal *Guardian* is up there with the rest. Gordon Brown, the Chancellor, has made many speeches praising capitalist enterprise and innovation and demanding that Britain follows the American path in this respect. On 26 January 2004, with Bill Gates, the chief executive of Microsoft and other leading capitalists in attendance, Brown stressed entrepreneurship in a speech that a business chief could have given. The next day, *The Guardian* devoted an editorial to the speech and declared: “It is a fresh sign of how far the Labour party itself has changed in its attitude to wealth creation. It is not many years since the promotion of enterprise was the preserve of rightwing thinktanks. Now it is mainstream Labour party thinking. Innovation is the name of the game – for everyone.”

The ideology of corporate capitalism is reinforced in countless

ways during virtually all our waking lives. You could wake up to a radio bulletin announcing that New Labour is to “reform” public services through offering “more choice”. This way of presenting the news accepts the use of the word “reform” – which means to make things better – in a context where this is disputed by public sector trade unionists and users of services. It also reasserts the consumerist message of “choice”, which is usually applied to things like buying a new car, and incorporates it into the provision of essential services like the NHS. Having heard the news bulletin, on your way to work you might buy a newspaper that is dominated by news of what the political and business élites are saying and doing (or a paper that has no serious news in it, leaving you totally in the dark as to what is going on). You will probably walk past a billboard advising you to buy a product “because you’re worth it”, or ways to make your money grow, or offers of easy credit.

At work, the suffocating, alienating ideology of the status quo will more often than not ensure that hierarchy is maintained. Speaking out of turn or becoming sick will – unless you are a top executive – lead to disciplinary action and the loss of earnings. Back home, the TV will be full of uninformative life-style and consumerist programmes – punctuated by adverts that associate products with a range of emotions and desires – that reinforce the messages of individualism and consumption as the “normal” way of life. The same programmes also serve to deaden any inquiring consciousness. Or you may have been at a lecture, where the message was that there is no known, viable alternative to “democracy” or that capitalism is alright – it just needs more aggressive regulation. Perhaps you have been to school, where the curriculum is designed to prepare you for the world of work, and where the virtues of subordination and deference are driven into students. There could well have been a branch of your local bank inside the school building, with computers and books sponsored by global corporations. The bombardment is relentless, reinforcing individualism and isolation. This is how capitalist ideology is transmitted, day in, day out, 24 hours a day.

Lying is increasingly a key feature of the ideas war, as we saw over Iraq. David Miller, from Stirling University’s Media

Research Institute, likened the propaganda that surrounded the 2003 invasion to the blockbuster film, *The Matrix*, where it was difficult to detect fact from fiction. Miller wrote that the attack on Iraq revealed “the yawning gulf between the political élite and the rest of us”. It disclosed an increasing separation between “matrix world – where official pronouncements are treated with some seriousness, even if subject to criticism – and ‘real world’ where their lies are transparent and their crimes recognised. Matrix world and real world exist in a kind of parallel universe”, he said, observing:

In matrix world, Iraq had and may still have Weapons of Mass Destruction; in the real world, it did not. In matrix world, there were links between Iraq and al-Qaeda, in the real world there were not. In matrix world, Lord Hutton is a respected judge who produced an independent report [on the BBC’s reporting of a government report on Iraq’s WMD]; in the real world Hutton was a whitewash. In matrix world, Katherine Gun [spy station whistleblower] and Clare Short [former minister] are deeply irresponsible for breaching trust and revealing secret information; in the real world they blew the whistle on illegal and immoral official behaviour [UK spying on the UN].

He is convinced that wholesale lying and misinformation by the political élite has been learned in part from the private sector and the PR industry, “which has done so much to advance the interests of mobile global capital”. Miller pointed out, however, that a growing number of people are breaking away from the lies. They have taken to the streets in large numbers while in Spain, the official explanation of the Madrid bombing was rejected by the electorate who swept the Aznar government aside. He added:

The conclusion to draw from this is that the ideological strength of our rulers is wavering as their common sense is challenged more and more consistently from below. The more this happens, the more desperate they become and the more extreme the lies. Lies and the propaganda machinery necessary to produce them are, in other

words, built into the very fabric of neo-liberal governance.

Iraq demonstrates that we are in an especially crucial and favourable moment. Control over economic and political processes, as well as what people think, is constantly undermined and loosened by the contradictions of globalisation. Transnational corporations have spurred the development of an emerging global consciousness of opposition and resistance. The dangers of this are recognised by people like Evelyn de Rothschild, one of Britain's wealthiest men. Writing in *The Guardian* (13 July 2004), Rothschild warned that capitalism might be under threat from itself. "The collapses of businesses in the US and Europe in a cloud of alleged fraud have shaken confidence in the financial system. People who normally pay little attention to international capital flows may have the feeling that their savings and pensions are suddenly at risk." He demanded an emphasis on ethical behaviour and leadership from government and business without which, he added, "it may be difficult to restore confidence and growth".

A theory of knowledge

Underlying the systems of ideas and theories are variations on philosophies about the general laws of being and thinking that in one way or another present a fragmentary and distorted view of reality. They are used to justify, support and reinforce the existing social and class relations. These philosophical systems in general:

- ▶ separate processes that are actually connected to each other in reality
- ▶ examine reality in a static, unchanging, non-historical way
- ▶ base themselves on "facts" separated from their source
- ▶ see things as either black or white, as one thing or the other
- ▶ reject contradiction as problematic rather than natural
- ▶ regard quantitative change as something separate from qualitative change
- ▶ rely on subjective and impressionistic approaches to knowledge

- ▶ emphasise the “unknowability” of the world
- ▶ make sensations into a barrier to knowledge instead of the source.

Individual sense experience and perception are emphasised as the foundation for all knowledge and understanding. The world is presented as a collection of given or accepted “facts” or empirical observations. In this way, the socio-historical origin of the facts is ignored, which helps give them a permanence they do not actually possess. The impression is given that knowledge is immediately gathered and that all you have to do is focus your senses. “Perception is reality” is a buzz phrase that you often find flying about management and marketing seminars. In other words, the real world is whatever our senses tell us it is.

Patently we need a philosophy that is capable of challenging capitalist ideas and philosophies. The struggles that erupt spontaneously against capitalism cannot by themselves lead to a fundamental change. If they could, they would have done so by now. Systems of thinking that predominate under capitalism are part of *their* weaponry and are based on the preservation of status quo. They do not in themselves prevent people from struggling. But they do play a key role in helping the ruling class to withstand and ultimately incorporate these conflicts while retaining power. We need a philosophy, a theory of knowledge, that is wholly independent of the status quo and its outlook in order to win a living, complex, high stakes conflict.

Contemporary global capitalism is distinguished from earlier periods by a vastly expanded area of knowledge and information. This affects the economy, work, culture and every aspect of daily life. It was once observed that on an average weekday, *The New York Times* contained more information than any contemporary of Shakespeare’s would have acquired in a lifetime. The explosive character of this process presents a formidable challenge as to how this information/knowledge is absorbed, processed and understood by both individuals and corporations.

People are confronted with countless complex networks of information, a bewildering variety of sources. Human relations

present themselves to people through bits of digitised data in plastic artefacts, which appear to have little connection with the real world of flesh and blood people. Under these conditions, there is a marked tendency to throw your hands up in the air and focus on simple things, on what you know, and what you need. Relativism, uncertainty, empiricism and scepticism predominate within systems of knowledge. These currents reinforce habits of thought which have traditionally prevailed in Anglo-Saxon societies since the 18th century.

In the last 20 years, much of philosophy has stressed what it claims is the unknowability of the world as a whole. At the same time it has focused on the subject, as an atomised individual. The postmodernist outlook combines these two components. All of these outlooks in one way or another rob us of the ability to enhance our knowledge of things from the point of view of social emancipation. They drive us towards a reliance on immediate impressions, instinct and emotions on the one side and on unstated and unproven assumptions on the other.

In a rapidly changing world, a flexible and unprejudiced theory of knowledge that grasps inter-connections and complex processes is decisive when it comes to planning for revolutionary change. A theory of knowledge defines and explains the relation between our ideas and the world which exists outside of our consciousness. Every thinking human being uses a simple theory of knowledge in order to make sense of what is going on, even if only to cross the road. Any conscious person constantly makes connections with other objects, based on their needs. From an early age, human beings, by exploring their surroundings, become conscious of this process as a social activity. Later, we use communication and language. Through all this we test out our thoughts in the real world.

Materialist dialectics – a rough guide

The relation of thought to the world around us – mind to matter – has preoccupied philosophers over the centuries. As Frederick Engels explained, in his outline of German philosophy: “Is our thought capable of knowing the real world, are we able in our ideas and concepts of the real world to form a true reflection of

reality? In philosophical language this question is called the question of the identity of thought and being. The vast majority of philosophers answer this question affirmatively.”

A materialist dialectical approach affirms the power of thought and knowledge to understand the world and act upon and change it. All that exists is potentially knowable. The goal is to penetrate the rapidly changing and often confusing appearance of things in order to discover and study the opposing forces, tendencies, strivings – contradictions – within objects and processes. Dialectical logic distinguishes between the form and the content of things and processes, and their dialectical interrelation.

Understanding things in this way is not an exact predictive formula or natural science but nevertheless reveals the tendencies and the dynamics of an open-ended process, how human beings make history, individually and socially. This approach can point to alternative paths of development, how ideas and thoughts become material forces and, articulated in an organisational form, lead to revolutionary change.

Our starting point is that there is a material world which exists independently of our consciousness and which is a precondition for thought. The material world consists of things, elements, parts, substances, organisms, human beings, society and thought and operates in a law-governed fashion. It has an objective *infinite* existence, whereas human beings are *relative* and *finite*. All this matter is *inter-connected* and in constant *self-movement* and change. In *transition* to new higher forms, features of the former reappear in a new way.

The infinite exists in *parts*. For example, we consist of carbon and other elements which have their origins in the beginning of time. Inter-action of the parts within themselves result in imprints, traces and reactions. Human beings in their struggle to live exist in contradiction – unity and conflict – with the world around them. There is a constant *interpenetration* between the two, as, for example, in the act of breathing and eating.

Through their activities in the material world, human beings experience *sensations*, traces and imprints which constitute the beginnings of thought. The process and practice of dialectical

cognition moves from concrete living perception to abstract thought and back to the concrete and is completed by theoretically-guided practice. This philosophical approach is tested and re-tested in transformative practice. We transform the world and ourselves simultaneously.

The elements of dialectics

- ▶ the objectivity of consideration – not examples but the thing-in-itself
- ▶ the totality of the diverse relations of this thing to others
- ▶ the development of this thing, phenomenon, its own movement, its own life
- ▶ the internally contradictory tendencies and sides in this thing – all things are contradictory in themselves
- ▶ the thing (phenomenon etc) as the sum and unity of opposites
- ▶ the struggle, unfolding, of these opposites, their contradictory strivings
- ▶ the union of analysis and synthesis – the break-down of the separate parts and the summation of these parts
- ▶ the relations of each thing are not only diverse but general, universal. Each thing is connected with every other
- ▶ not only the unity of opposites but the transition of every determination, quality, feature, side, property into every other, into its opposite
- ▶ the struggle of content with form and conversely. The throwing off of the form, the transformation of the content
- ▶ the transition of quantity into quality and vice versa
- ▶ the endless process of the discovery of new sides, relations etc
- ▶ the endless process of the deepening of our knowledge of the thing, of phenomena, processes, from appearance to essence and from less profound to more profound essence
- ▶ from co-existence to causality and from one form of connection and reciprocal dependence to another, deeper, more general form
- ▶ the repetition at a higher stage of certain features, properties, etc, of the lower and the apparent return to the old.

From Lenin's notebooks on the study of Hegel's *Science of Logic*

Dialectical logic understands that the concepts and categories that we use are not purely thought forms. They are the result of human practice and as such are forms and an expression of the movement and content of the world itself. They contain opposing sides and tendencies. As Lenin remarked in his comments on Hegel's *Science of Logic*:

Logic is the science not of external forms of thought, but of the laws of development... i.e., of the development of the entire concrete content of the world and of its cognition, i.e., the sum-total, the conclusion of the history of knowledge of the world.

Our context is our existence and life under a global capitalist system and our concerns about what is happening and how it might affect the future. Our senses are tuned to potential sources of new information. The world, as we have established, consists of an infinite number of processes, things, events which have their own identities. In manifesting their identities, these objects come into a mutual, necessary contradictory relationship with thinking human beings. Through its own movement in time and space, a thing and its identity assumes a new and opposite form in thought in the shape of a finite *difference* with itself. This occurs through a process that is known as *negation*.

Something is beginning to come into existence which was not there before. The thing itself comes out of itself. This is a key moment because it acknowledges that things come into being and that a new moment cannot be the same as anything that went before or be recaptured. Time and space have moved on. These moments first reveal themselves as a quantity of sensations, which are a direct connection with the world outside of us and subject to dialectical laws of movement. These sensations build up and transform themselves into a new quality. Through self-movement they are negated into what is known as a *semblance*, a fleeting moment of a much deeper process, like the foam on a wave. For example, we may hear a brief news item or read about plans to cut 100,000 jobs in the civil service. Semblance is the result of movement in the external world and as such is objective and contains – in an as yet undeveloped form –

Negation

In its ordinary meaning, the word “negate” is defined as to nullify, deny or contradict something. As developed by the 19th century objective idealist German philosopher Georg Hegel, negation has a more complex significance. It describes moments of development and change. It signifies a process by which something is cancelled out (negated) while its content and form are not lost. The way in which we reflect the world outside of thought in thought is an important example of this process. Clearly we cannot have the object physically inside our being, but we have an abstract image of it. This way of understanding movement and change is vital, because the results of the previous development are not wiped out. For example, the computer incorporates the techniques of early technologies. Capitalism contains the results of all previous human history. Ageing is an example in human life. Your changing appearance over time reflects and is the result of everything that has happened to your body.

essence. Essence can be viewed as the sum total of connections, relations and internal laws of a thing in its movement.

What has taken place here is the formation of a particular relation between ourselves as individuals and the universal, the world outside of us. There is an interpenetration of opposites: a passing moment of the infinite whole touches and enters the finite part. Semblance is an unresolved, unstable moment which, nevertheless, contains possibilities. An example of this is walking down a busy road and a face emerges that you think you might know. This face is different from the rest, distinguishing itself from the crowd. There is a semblance of somebody. You keep on looking – receiving more and more sensations – then at a certain point it becomes clear whether this is the person you know. Through an interconnection with something outside, the original difference – which do not forget contains the original identity – is negated once more into *appearance*. The appearance does not coincide with the essence of the thing, although it contains it. If it were the same, life would be much simpler and there would no need for science!

Contradiction

This is a philosophical category expressing the inner source of all motion and development. As Hegel says in *The Science of Logic*: “Something moves, not because it is here at one point of time and there at another, but because at one and the same point of time it is here and not here, and in this here both is and is not.” He adds: “And similarly internal self-movement proper, or impulse in general... is nothing else than the fact that something is in itself and is also the deficiency or the negative of itself, in one and the same respect.” Capitalism is just such a thing. Capital and labour are, objectively, opposite forces. The drive of capital is to maximise shareholder value and profits. This is achieved by depriving workers of a portion of the value that is added in production through the exercise of labour power. By their very position in class society, workers are involved in a constant struggle to minimise exploitation and to increase their share of value. These mutually exclusive interests are, however, reconciled in a relative fashion, when capital and labour are engaged simultaneously in the single production process. These relations constitute a living contradiction, which is the source of their development. As Hegel explains: “Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality, and it is only insofar as it contains contradiction that anything moves and has impulse and activity.”

Established firmly at this point is a *contradiction* between the thing and our knowledge of it. If we want to know more about the person we have just met, or the job loss announcement, we have to interact with this process or person. At this point, the knowledge we already have begins to be synthesised with the developing process of the new. To grapple with the essence of the process that gave rise to appearance, means referring back to the source of the original sensation, at another moment in time. Thus, we discover new sides and aspects, to enrich our knowledge, to make it multi-dimensional, not one-sided, grapple with it in its movement. This is what using concepts in a dialectical way means.

An example – analysing political change

Take the fall in turn-out at the general election of 2001 as our subject matter. We have to look at the different aspects, assemble the data, compare the results with previous elections over time, what kind of people did not vote, their age and so on. A dialectical approach enables us to go much further, however. We take this part – the election result – and synthesise it with our previous analysis. The very dialectical nature of the thing we are investigating drives our understanding. For example, we know that the thing under investigation has a contradictory life in and of itself. Unlike superficial, bourgeois thinkers, we see parliamentary democracy, for example, as a phenomenon that has an historical trajectory. It came into existence at a certain time under specific conditions. These have changed with the evolution of capitalism. The parliamentary system is not a permanent feature of history and is in transition. The concept of parliamentary democracy contains elements of a new, opposite, more developed democracy. On this basis, we can make an assessment of the nature of the qualitative change that is manifested in a slump in turn-out, tracing its connections to the driving force of globalisation.

In more philosophical detail, this is what has taken place. We continue to analyse the parts, the features, the properties, moments of this process. These are brought into thought through negation because, as we have said, they cannot be the same as the object itself. These are abstract reflections of the living movement outside. The abstraction gains richness and becomes more concrete in this practice of cognition. This abstract image is the appearance in subjective thought of the objective content. That objective content is an absolute within the relative of our existing knowledge.

What we have done is to recreate in thought an objectively existing “whole”. In this case, it is a totality of inter-connected processes and things connected to the fact of the election result. In this new whole, all the parts, features and properties we knew from before, continue to exist in a new relation to other parts. For example, more people can be said in an objective sense to be rejecting the legitimacy of the political order. The whole is, most

importantly, not simply the sum of its parts but has an objective existence and logic of its own, which then drives the part as a law-governed process. For example, the capitalist system is made

Laws of motion

A dialectical approach begins from general principles about the operation of nature, society and thought. The relationship between things operates according to laws of motion. These exist independently of thought and are discovered by human activity and reflected in thought. In inorganic nature, many things can be predicted with absolute accuracy. In society, the outcomes are less certain because they are the result of human action, based on conscious decisions and practice which alter reality. This is made even more complex by the fact that these “decisions” are parts of a social whole, with each part having an effect on other parts. Nevertheless, because we are part of nature, our social existence develops in a law-governed fashion which can be expressed in concepts. In the *Dialectical Biologist*, Lewontin and Levins explain

The first principle of a dialectical view then, is that a whole is a relation of heterogeneous parts that have no prior existence *as parts*. The second principle, which flows from the first, is that, in general, the properties of parts have no prior alienated existence but are acquired by being parts of a particular whole... A third dialectical principle, then, is that the interpenetration of parts and wholes is a consequence of the interchangeability of subject and object, of cause and effect... Because elements recreate each other by interacting and are recreated by wholes of which they are parts, change is a characteristic of all systems and all aspects of all systems. That is a fourth dialectical principle.

Our objective is to discover the course of development within things themselves. In deepening our knowledge of things, processes, phenomena we go from appearance to more profound understanding as we discover the unity and connection, the reciprocal dependence of the world. As we discover more and more connections within and between things, identical, enduring qualities reveal themselves as essential relations. It is in these relations that dialectical laws are given a concrete expression.

up of parts like corporations, finance centres, national governments, international bodies, political and cultural traditions and other phenomena. These inter-connected parts are drawn into a global logic that has its own dynamic. For example, it has a globalising tendency which penetrates and drives the parts, and can be revealed as the actual source of the fall in turn-out mentioned above.

This globalisation process is therefore a cause of new *effects*, both economically, socially, politically and culturally. There is a reciprocal process whereby the effects themselves turn into new *causes*. All this is built up in thought through dialectical logical concepts to the point of *actuality*. This is the closest we get to the real world in thought and is the highest point of essence. We have established an objective truth, which is itself relative in time and space. From here the necessary impulse is to the external world in the form of transforming practice. We are anticipating what we have to do. This will be based on the possibilities that appear at this point. These take the form of *abstract notions*. We are back in the world of practice. This philosophical approach is realised, tested and re-tested in transforming practice and the analysis of practice in the light of theory.

The value of cognising things in this way is that changes in the world outside of us are allowed their own life within our thoughts. The temptation in subjective idealist thought is to paste an image derived from previous experience on to the world rather than to grapple with the fact that there are changes going on. A non-dialectical approach turns away from the source of sensation and relies simply on the past to interpret what after all at this point is only an image. In other words, we must avoid a rush to making a judgement about the significance of this moment.

Viewing the dialectical life of all phenomena and the internal relations within things enables us to study changes in history from the standpoint of today. By analysing a particular part or feature of capitalism, we are able to reach conclusions about its specific history in relation to the whole of the social system. This approach brings us closer to the crises, possibilities and real movement of forces which in their inter-relationship constitute history and indicate possibilities for the future.

Science and dialectics

Quantum mechanics demonstrates in a powerful way how contradiction is an inherent property of matter. In other words, a thing can be two mutually contradictory things at the same time. At a “macro” level, change may appear smooth and continuous, as in the flow of light from a source like the sun. But at a micro-level, on the scale of atoms and molecules physical processes are discontinuous and occur in quantum leaps. Particles of light, “photons”, are outstanding examples of this. A quantum entity, the photon, may behave as a wave or a particle, depending on the circumstances. In terms of scientific observation and measurement, wave and particle properties are mutually exclusive opposites. This is known as “wave-particle duality”. This duality demonstrates the unity and conflict of opposites. Left alone, photons maintain the characteristics of both wave and particle. But when they interact with other matter – a metal surface or a prism of glass – they take on the characteristics *either* of a particle *or* a wave. Included in this wave-particle duality is the transformation of opposites, as well: an electron ejected as a particle from a heated metal surface may be diffracted by a crystal, showing its wave nature in the process.

The relation between the whole and the part is shown by the development of the human brain. We are all born with some 100 billion neurons – brain cells, backed up by ten times as many support cells, which exist within the whole of our brain. The relations between these cells is determined by the unique experience of each individual, as the activity of the child in a particular environment, surrounded by specific human relations shapes its brain, particularly over the first two years of life. The whole life of the individual influences and shapes the parts, in particular in the brain.

One fundamental property of matter-in-motion in nature is the negation of the negation. The tree in the forest grows leaves during the spring, leaves that are living, breathing organs responsible for powering the whole tree. In the autumn, as the tree begins to shut down for the winter, the leaves fall to the ground – the first negation of living matter to dead. But the dead leaves are themselves food for new living organisms – fungi, plants and, eventually, new trees – taking part in the second negation, the negation of the negation, to be incorporated once more into living matter.

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The significance of postmodernism

Postmodernism can be shown to provide a consolation to those who consider themselves critical of aspects of contemporary capitalism, but who also lack the belief and confidence that it is possible to transform reality for the better.

The key exponents of postmodernism are the French philosophers Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. All but Baudrillard arose from the French philosophical school called post-structuralism of the early 1960s. The crisis within post-war Stalinism resulted in a philosophical vacuum which began to be filled by the post-structuralists. By the early 1980s Lyotard, Derrida and Foucault became popular and were seen as the prophets of a challenge to all existing ideologies and world views. In literary theory, architecture, the visual arts and media studies, postmodern ideas and theories became a major theme in university courses and the theory underpinning modern marketing practice.

The rise of the information economy and a world market based upon increasingly sophisticated forms of specialisation and fragmented markets seemed to vindicate postmodernist emphasis on plurality, difference and the blurring of the difference between image and reality. The global economy of the 1980s and 1990s and the demise of the Soviet Union reinforced the popularity of postmodernism's modest philosophical stance. For some it was a viable ideological alternative to the universalist themes of the Enlightenment, whether of the Marxist variety or the pure bourgeois narratives. Hence postmodernism became popular as a kind of theorisation of the development of the global economy, and also a critique of this globalisation in non-totalising and particular terms. Its rejection of "ideologies" and "overarching theories" fitted in well with a world where the old certainties of the cold war came tumbling down and society headed into a new period of history.

The durable attraction of postmodernism can be explained by its ironic attitude to the world, which is reminiscent of the practical impotence of Hegel's beautiful soul. The German philosopher outlined how the beautiful soul and the unhappy consciousness are often generated when people feel that they have little capacity to change the world, but instead can only comment about the world in an ironic and possibly sceptical manner. Postmodernism can be shown to provide a consolation to those who consider themselves critical of aspects of contemporary capitalism, but who also lack the belief and confidence that it is possible to transform reality for the better. It thus acts as an oppositional ideology at the level of popular consciousness for those who believe that something is wrong, and yet are also sceptical and pessimistic about the possibility of a better historical alternative. It functions as a trend that lacks a vision of the future, and instead accommodates to what exists in the present in the form of its ironic stance.

The "left" school of postmodernism, personified by Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault often makes strong criticisms of capitalism, but they are limited by a sceptical approach to the possibility of truth and an irrationalism that doubts the very validity of philosophy and social theory. Overwhelmed by the totalising drive of global capital, it tends to deny the fundamental contradiction between social being and social consciousness and thereby the possibility of revolutionary transformation. Hence, postmodernism can be generally characterised as a petty-bourgeois ideology that vacillates between capitalism and socialism because of its resigned scepticism about knowing the world and the possibility of altering it for the better.

Do we live in a postmodern world?

American literary critic Fredric Jameson has characterised postmodernist theory and views as the logic of contemporary capitalism. The emphasis on diversity, plurality, fragmentation, irony, and even the cynicism of postmodern type ideologues is certainly an expression of profound historical processes, and has become indispensable to the imperatives of capital accumulation. So within the spheres of culture, architecture, economics and

political ideology, postmodernism characterises what is required in order to maintain and expand modern capitalism. But it would be wrong to describe contemporary global capitalism as a "postmodernist world" because this would turn the relationship between social being and consciousness on its head. For the market state economies are still objectively and materially defined by the alienated and exploitative character of the capital-labour relation. In this context, a number of postmodernist ideas can be incorporated into the logic of capital accumulation, such as plurality and irony. But these ideas do not in themselves constitute or explain the essential historical logic of capitalism or in its essential being.

Given the complex and often contradictory origins of what became postmodernism, it would be simplistic simply to dismiss it as a right-wing trend that makes no important criticisms of the status quo, despite its blanket rejection of Enlightenment ideas. On the contrary, the founders of postmodernism – the French post-structuralists referred to above and their Romantic predecessors – outline significant criticisms of the historical limitations of capitalism. Deleuze and Foucault, despite their formal rejection of Marxist historical materialism and disdain of Hegel, are still capable of making formidable criticisms of its social limitations. In the centre is Derrida, who generally avoids any type of direct political comment, but who was motivated to defend his own conception of the legacy of Marx, even if he did not connect Marx to any integral revolutionary commitments. The right-wing trend is expressed by ex-Marxist Lyotard, whose *The Postmodern Condition* published in 1979, was a vision of post-industrial societies dominated by information technologies. With Baudrillard the irrational, deeply reactionary side of postmodernism comes to the fore. He claimed that the first Gulf War did not take place since all we can know is fictitious images and we are incapable of differentiating between the real and its simulacrum.

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Is globalisation just a policy?

There are many campaign groups, trade unions and political organisations who maintain that capitalist globalisation is essentially a series of policies that corporations and states can and will adjust if they come under sufficient pressure.

If globalisation is just a *policy*, then there is no need to change the nature of the capitalist system of production. We simply have to persuade bodies like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and governments to see sense and help the poor.

Tony Woodley, leader of the Transport and General Workers Union, has called on the New Labour government to support industry in Britain as an incentive for employers to keep production at home rather than export it to cheaper-labour areas of the world, which is known as off-shoring. The number of manufacturing jobs in Britain has fallen by 750,000 since 1997, with the majority going abroad.

The World Development Movement is a major campaigning group that claims it tackles the underlying causes of poverty. The WDM's website says; "We lobby decision makers to change the *policies* that keep people poor. We research and promote positive alternatives. We work alongside people in the developing world who are standing up to injustice. The world has the wealth and means to end poverty. Yet nearly half of the world's population live on less than £1.40 a day. And over 11 million children will die from poverty-related illness this year alone. *Policies* of governments and companies are keeping people poor. *Policies* that ensure global trade benefits the rich, not the poor. The three richest men in the world are wealthier than the 48 poorest countries combined. *Policies* that give increasing power to multinational companies. For every £1 of aid going into poor countries, multinationals take 66p of profits out." [emphasis added] Among WDM's campaign successes, the website says, is the decision in 1999 by the International Monetary Fund to link debt relief to poverty reduction.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) are presently the most influential Left group in Britain, and what they say and do is considered by significant numbers of people as an expression of Marxism. But the SWP too sees corporate-driven globalisation as a policy question first and foremost.

The Marxist outlook maintains that the material world is the primary basis for understanding the role of human practice and consciousness. Thus human activity depends on its relationship with nature in order to meet material needs. Specific social relations become the historical basis for realising these needs. Consequently, the material and social being of humanity is the objective ground for understanding the subjective role of consciousness.

Capitalist globalisation is not an ephemeral and transitory phenomena that stems from thoughts and ideas, or the particular policies of specific capitalists and politicians. Instead, globalisation represents the present structural development, or social being of the system within the imperialist stage of world capitalism. The essential economic content of globalisation is today expressed by the competitive and contradictory domination of transnational capital. This is the result of the transformation of national monopoly and finance capital.

Alex Callinicos is the main proponent of the SWP on questions of globalisation and imperialism.

But in his *Anti-Capitalist Manifesto*, he makes no analytical mention of the importance of transnational capital. Instead, his approach is based upon an idealist emphasis on the importance of what occurs at the level of the political superstructure – what is said and done by politicians and bureaucrats.

Thus for him, globalisation becomes a policy and ideology. His book labels such policies “Washington Consensus”, or the “neo-liberal” agenda. These terms, which are taken directly from bourgeois social science, embrace trade liberalisation, competitive exchange rates, privatisation deregulation, and fiscal discipline. They formed the ideological dogma of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations and have since become orthodox economic outlooks.

For Callinicos, “neo-liberalism” has represented a “conscious

strategy” carried out by the American administration, the US Treasury, IMF and World Bank. He tends to suggest that globalisation is exaggerated as an economic development, and that it does not represent an irreversible tendency towards greater economic integration. Globalisation is considered as tenuous and something that could break down. In his view, it is a “contingent” and “reversible process”.

Callinicos argues that the anti-capitalist movement has posed a challenge to the “neo-liberal” agenda. The 1999 Seattle demonstration against the WTO in particular represented a new level of anti-capitalist militancy. This shows, he claims, that it is possible to challenge, modify and even change the present agenda of world capitalism. He maintains: “If the neo-liberal hegemony began with the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9th 1989, then it lasted barely ten years, to the first great demonstration in Seattle on 30th November 1999. The Washington Consensus continues to provide the framework for policy-making in virtually every state, but it is now intensely contested.” This view represents a naive and misleading optimism that plays up the success of the anti-capitalist movement and correspondingly downplays the resources of capital. This is done in order to reinforce the illusion that all that is necessary to overthrow the current agenda is the adoption of new policies, via pressure on pro-capitalist governments.

It is undoubtedly important to show the historical importance of struggles against global capital’s policies, such as the Zapatistas’ rebellion in Mexico against the NAFTA treaty, and protests in Nigeria against the role of the transnational corporations (TNCs), campaigns against Third World debt, strikes in France against privatisation, mass upheaval in Argentina, plus the ongoing momentum of international anti-capitalist demonstrations. Callinicos, however, not only gives these movements a transforming quality they do not actually possess. He goes further and equates the emergence of the anti-capitalist movement with a development of ideas which challenge the domination of capitalist ideology. For example, he argues that the movement represents the ascendancy of a new intellectual paradigm. He says: “And so the great debate over

capitalism has resumed, two hundred years after it began in the aftermath of the Great French Revolution. Postmodernism is now history... Nevertheless, the debate has moved on, less because of some decisive theoretical refutation of postmodernism... than because the world-wide rebellion against capitalist globalisation has changed the intellectual agenda.”

In other words, he sees the consciousness of the need to challenge capitalism as a system arising spontaneously out of struggles and practical activity on this or that issue. Callinicos maintains that the “logic” of the anti-capitalist movement can resolve strategic questions because capital is ultimately not a structure. It is rather an expression of a policy that can be challenged and even overcome by the application of enough mass pressure.

He contends that any ambiguities within the anti-capitalist movement about understanding and defining globalisation can be resolved simply by self-definition. The *Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* considers globalisation as a formal shell and a dispensable outer layer, while the policies are considered as the inner content and essential to the operation of capital. But this is a subjective illusion, in that the structural content of globalisation is based upon the domination of the transnational corporations (TNCs). This idealist inversion between form and content is expressed by the SWP’s reformist programme that is a substitute for a revolutionary approach.

Formally, Callinicos is for the traditional Marxist goals of social ownership, workers’ control, self-management and socialist planning to replace the anarchic domination of a market economy. But this is the aim of a long-term and “ultimate” strategic programme. The immediate aim is to challenge the policy aims of capital in order to create the conditions for its transcendence in the future.

He eclectically accepts that a transformation of form leaves the content essentially unchanged and admits that changing the policy of contemporary capitalism means that we are still a “long way” from socialist planning. However, he tentatively “overcomes” this problem by saying that what matters, what is immediate, concrete and practical, is to come up with a

programme that is essentially a left-wing but nevertheless reformist alternative within the limits of capitalism. Revealingly he writes:

Socialist planning... is both a feasible and a desirable alternative to capitalism. But we are a long way from it. Indeed, the neo-liberal policies of the Washington Consensus are driving us in the opposite direction, towards a world where everything becomes... a commodity to be bought and sold for profit. A movement that is seeking to reverse this process must therefore organise mass struggles to demand measures that would both offer immediate remedies and begin to introduce a different social logic.

The strategic question that obviously arises is: how is it possible to prevent the logic of capital from integrating these reformist demands into itself? There is no objectively valid strategic answer to this problem. Instead he can only outline the moral/ethical criteria of the programme of the new “left” reformist government. This includes abolition of Third World debt; introduction of a tax of international currency transactions; restoration of capital controls; introduction of a universal basic income; reduction of the working week; defence of public services and renationalisation of privatised industries; progressive taxation to finance public services and redistribute wealth and income; abolition of immigration controls and extension of citizenship rights; a programme to forestall environmental catastrophe; dissolution of the military-industrial complex and a defence of civil liberties.

He outlines the main aspects of his strategic approach, which is to put mass pressure on nation states in order to create the conditions for implementing these anti-capitalist demands. He writes:

First, the demands listed above are generally placed on states acting singly or in concert. This reflects the fact that, whatever the effects of globalisation, states are still the most effective mechanisms in the world as currently constituted for mobilising resources to achieve collectively agreed goals... But, states, because they are at least

partially dependent on securing the consent of their subjects, are vulnerable to political pressure from below.

Mass movements can therefore extract reforms from them. It is, however, crucial to understand that any such concessions will be won, not through negotiations with ostensibly sympathetic governments, but through mass struggles. The reforms outlined above go against the logic of capital. They can only be won by a movement that maintains its political independence and has the power, thanks to the central role played within it by the organised working class, to wrest concessions from the system.

This stance shows the political significance of Callinicos's view of globalisation as a collection of policies rather than a phenomenon with a cohesive structural content. The importance of globalisation is considered as secondary in relation to the continuing significance of nation states. If nation states are the essential political content this means that a national reformist political strategy retains its validity, despite globalisation.

His conception contains nothing on the importance of overcoming the TNCs as a strategic aim of labour. Indeed, Callinicos has essentially replaced the class struggle of capital and labour with that of political struggle between the nation state and the people. This formulation suggests that the nation state can be pressured and transformed into meeting the objectives of the mass struggles of the people. The objectives of the working class are effectively dissolved into the mass abstract democracy of the people.

This also means that revolution, as the expression of the victory of labour over capital, can be downgraded into a distant and secondary issue. The result of this opportunism is to create an objective divide between reforms and revolution. That is why the SWP's anti-imperialism in practice results in support for and organising of pressure group politics. Their aim is to try and change the policies of the capitalist nation state rather than striving to overthrow this state. This is the reality behind the radical rhetoric.