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Desperate stratagems

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There are no short cuts to working class power and human liberation, writes Nick Rogers

As global capitalism's financial crash turns into deep recession, the question haunting the political left is, how can we provide the leadership that will inspire the working class to take over the running of society?

Most of the left remain utterly confused. Simon Wells' letter in defence of Chris Knight's 'Dancing on the grave of capitalism' action¹ against the criticisms of James Turley the week before², although eccentric, embodies the refusal of most of the left to face up to the difficult and arduous tasks that confront communists.

Dancing on the grave

I attended the Halloween event in London's Docklands that Chris Knight of the Radical Anthropology Group had predicted would be the start of "the revolution"³. Held in the plaza at the top of Canary Wharf tube on Friday October 31, it was so short of participants that Simon and I ended up carrying one of the excellently designed effigies used as part of the 'ceremony' that was enacted. Incantations to 'the government of the dead' and for the dispersal of all 'evil' apart, this was decent enough street theatre - and the Barking Bateria samba band, although depleted in numbers, was stirring as always.

But precious few of the working class that Simon thinks this kind of event might appeal to turned up to watch. On one side of the plaza, the presumably empty Lehman Brothers building towered; on the other, prices from the New York stock exchange spun around in ticker tape fashion, indicating something of a market rally on the other side of the Atlantic. As they decanted from the surrounding financial institutions, a few besuited citizens watched in an amused - probably condescending - manner before drifting away. Whether they were technically part of the working class, petty bourgeoisie or indeed the bourgeoisie itself, they did not seem to identify with the message of the performance - although a combination of a confusing script and choreography and lousy acoustics probably did not clarify the political programme on offer.

A number of individuals from two or three left groups sold newspapers. I distributed a few *Weekly Workers*. By far the biggest turnout of the organised left was the Socialist Workers Party - led by Alex Callinicos, Martin

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And I am glad to say that three of them (admittedly a small proportion!) made a donation using our PayPal facility - thanks to PL (£20), JS (£12) and FK (£10) for your generosity. It's good to see that we've registered an increase on both counts!

Not too many contributions via snail mail this week though. But worthy of mention, as usual, is comrade TR for his regular £60 gift - thank you, comrade. And PR sent us an extra £10 with his resubscription. He also made a useful suggestion for future articles.

On top of that we have eight standing order contributions that come under the 'new SO' category, amounting to an extra £73. Thank you, PM, DB, BH, BP, CG, JS, RK, and GD. All that adds up to £185 received over the last seven days, taking our total for November to £485. But we need to go well over £1,000 to make up for the deficit over the last two months.

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Smith and John Rees. Keeping themselves well apart from the magical goings-on in the circle of pumpkins, the 150 or so SWP members spent most of their time chanting, "Anti, anti, anti-capitalista". Were they expecting a large number of Spaniards or Italians to show up? I never quite fathomed their choice of language. Apparently a few chants of "Why don't you jump then?" served to distinguish the ranks of our brave revolutionaries from the organisers' suggested slogan of "Don't jump, we love you - even capitalists are grandparents".

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The SWP ended the evening by charging from one end of the plaza to the other (sending pumpkins flying and threatening effigies in the process), coming to a dead stop in front of the police, before wheeling around to run back to the other side. No attempt was made to breach police lines and the intention of this activity was far from clear. Maybe it was aimed at impressing any anarchist youth present. Maybe it served to create a sense of cohesion amongst the mainly young SWP contingent. Maybe it was an attempt to kick-start Chris Knight's anticipated "revolution". The fact that at most only 300 souls had responded no doubt put paid to the latter ambition.

Unlike Simon, this did not strike me as an event that "resonates with the working class" or demonstrated unambiguously that the left "can work together". It was not even organised "away from the internecine and sectarian debates of blogs, newspapers, email and pubs", as Simon believes. Furious debates have been conducted on a number of ad hoc email lists about the extent to which the Radical Anthropology Group should be involved that have been no different to those conducted by any left group - except for an even greater level of hurt feelings and more resignations. That is why RAG was not officially associated with the event.

Remember, Simon had critiqued my original analysis⁴ of Chris Knight's 'October theses', suggesting that I was "not listening to what the working class are saying"⁵. He insisted that "Capitalism is in crisis, and when that happens the working class comes together to negate the capitalist leech." I do not write now to describe what actually happened on October 31 with any triumphalist sense that the low turnout and far from revolutionary outcome vindicates the position I had set out in my original letter. I was reluctant to write anything about it because I had no wish to rub salt into anyone's wounds. However, Simon's attempt to draw precisely the wrong conclusions from the event and the likelihood that Chris Knight will continue to pursue a flawed course of political action does merit a correction.

I do not wish to decry anyone's efforts. An attempt to use Halloween to focus attention on the failures of capitalism and the possibility of an alternative future via the platform of street theatre is valid. Damage is caused when exaggerated claims are made about what such activity will achieve and the activity is linked to a confused and opportunist political programme - which was the case with the 'October theses'.

I have already spelt out the reactionary nature of many of the points Chris makes. But to restate one aspect of Chris's message, he issues a call to action to soldiers in Afghanistan on the basis that Britain's political leadership is not prosecuting the war against al Qa'eda and the Taliban vigorously enough. He accuses the military command of treason for proposing negotiations with the Taliban. He calls on the monarch to dismiss the government. I presume Chris is seeking to incite a military mutiny. What he is spelling out, however, are the elements of a rightwing military coup. The belief that the army was betrayed by the political class in a conflict that could otherwise have been won is exactly what motivated the German right wing after World War I, the French right wing after the Algerian war, and the US right wing up to this day after the Vietnam war.

The lesson that Chris and Simon need to learn is that communists appeal to members of the armed forces on the basis of class solidarity - not nationalism.

Sex strike theory

Since October 31 Chris Knight and his academic and political collaborator, Camilla Power, have floated a proposal for a string of 'dark moon' ritual events that are predicted to lead to a major political upheaval (a velvet revolution, no less) by summer solstice next year.

Chris Knight is the author of a compelling theory (confirming and updating the insights of Engels in *The origin of the family, private property and the state*) about how human culture, including language, came to be - the original revolution, in other words, that made our

species human. His model is that the building of political alliances by women and their male kin to suppress the behaviour of dominant males seeking to monopolise sexual access to women - and specifically the development of rituals around the synchronisation of female menstruation, both real and sham, with the lunar cycle - led to the take-off of symbolic culture. The discovery of large amounts of ochre at almost all early human archaeological sites going back several hundred thousand years - a mineral that is still commonly used in ritual activity by hunter-gatherers to paint the human body - supports the hypothesis that the first stirrings of human culture involved cosmetics.

The female kin coalition model of the origins of human culture suggests that women painted themselves red at each dark moon - shamming collective female menstruation - in order to enforce the separation of sexual partners (a 'sex strike'). The ritual period of dark moon in which kin and gender solidarity were strengthened presaged the beginning of the lunar cycle (waxing moon) when men went hunting. Returning with meat to be shared collectively with the clan of their female sexual partners at full moon a period of celebration and reproductive sex commenced (during waning moon), until the cycle began again at dark moon.

Chris has brilliantly argued⁶ that the ethnographic evidence on hunter-gatherer taboos fits with an original ban on eating one's own kill (which was to be handed over to the kin of the hunter's sexual partner/s). Similar work on mythology, turning that of Levi-Strauss on its feet, also lends support to the model.

The model has proven profoundly productive in a number of academic fields. Camilla Power has enhanced it by incorporating Darwinian selfish gene theory. Lionel Sims has demonstrated how the model may be applied to the study of megalithic monuments such as Stonehenge⁷ and Avebury to illuminate the intentions of the builders.

However, what the model does not do is provide a guide to contemporary political action. It does support the contention that we are a revolutionary species - that a series of political struggles made us the culture-bearing species we are today. Also that we lived as communists in a world essentially of abundance for tens of thousands of years.

But, if the Marxist model is correct, the next human revolution will be based on the material reality of the world we inhabit now. Lunar cycles were incredibly important for early hominids. The waxing moon (which rises before sunset) provided light to extend the hunting day into the night. In the equatorial regions where our species evolved, the rhythms of the moon are much more impressive than the hardly discernable seasonal variations of the solar cycle.

Today in most capitalist societies light pollution means the moon can barely be seen. The vast majority of the population is mostly unaware of what phase the moon is in. Even when we do notice it, the moon makes no meaningful difference to the lives we lead. We are not hunter-gatherers. We are wage-slaves in a capitalist society. The Marxist hypothesis is that the reality of the lives we live now - lives in which old myths and taboos are increasingly swept aside - makes possible a revolution that will usher in a communist society. That the creation by capitalism of a majority working class with no property stake in the means of production, combined with an increasing socialisation of production, provides the agency and the opportunity for overthrowing class society.

The female kin coalition model maintains that the mythic syntax that informs our appreciation of story-telling today derives from the binary (or dialectical) division of the mapping of hunter-gatherer lives on the lunar cycle. A strong case can be made for this. Nevertheless, it is the way in which that mythic syntax is expressed in contemporary society, the way in which we use language now, the kind of stories we tell to each other now that is the only basis for a workers' revolution.

Attempting to coordinate political activity with a lunar cycle (as Chris and Camilla are proposing) is based on nostalgia for a previous (and long passed) period of human history, rather than an analysis of contemporary material reality. Certainly, creating a unified working class across racial, national and gender divisions is a crucial aspect of the task of communists, but it is similarly unclear that any straightforward re-enactment of the original human revolution - in which women did overcome their oppression - is in any way viable.

Building a Communist Party

The attempt of Chris Knight, apparently supported by Simon Wells, to summon into existence a spontaneous workers' uprising based on the model of the human revolution that reached its culmination perhaps 150,000 years ago is typical of the desperation of the

bulk of the left - of the search for a short cut to political success.

Dave Craig, in the same issue of the *Weekly Worker* in which Simon's letter appears, repeats his call for a republican socialist party to unite "communists" and "socialists" in Britain (by which he means an organisation that would provide a comfortable home for both revolutionaries and reformists). On this occasion he attempts to burnish his revolutionary credentials by urging the formation of a world Communist Party⁸. Whether this would unite the current 'revolutionary' internationals or be an attempt by the meagre forces of the Campaign for a Marxist Party to market its own global franchise, Dave does not make clear.

Nor does Dave explain how yet another attempt to unite revolutionaries and reformists on a national basis would fare any better than the multiple 'socialist unity' projects (including the "republican socialist" Scottish Socialist Party) that litter the British political landscape. Nor why we can apparently achieve communist unity internationally, but not within Britain - or at least why, having achieved international communist unity, we have to bury our newly-won organisation in yet another unprincipled lash-up.

The revolutionary left has failed time and time again because its generally sorry excuse for Marxist theory is a mechanism for maintaining sect coherence rather than serving as a living body of work that provides answers to immediate political problems. Marxist theory is discussed by true believers within the confines of the sect. The only way that is conceived of engaging with the mass of the working class is on 'bread and butter' issues that place your average revolutionary group only a matter of a few degrees to the left of the traditional social democratic parties.

Dave Craig at least shares part of this analysis of the left's economism with the CPGB, but his republicanism is of a variety that will not scare off reformists. No space on Dave's political platform for challenging the bourgeoisie's monopoly of arms - a commonplace of 19th century socialist politics and still a demand raised across the political spectrum in the United States.

What is required is a mass party of the working class committed to working class independence, internationalism and the fullest possible democracy both in the workers' movement and in the state - a Communist Party. To create such a party we need to break the hold over the working class of the major bourgeois workers' party - the Labour Party - and expose to sharp debate and the genuine traditions of Marxism those left groups which currently offer *misleadership* to the working class. Only in this way will it be possible to seize the opportunities afforded by the present capitalist crisis and organise the working class to exercise its objective social weight on the global political arena.

Notes

1. [S Wells, Letters, November 6.](#)
2. [J Turley, 'What sort of unity?' Weekly Worker October 30.](#)
3. [C Knight, Letters, October 9.](#)
4. [N Rogers, Letters, October 16.](#)
5. [S Wells, Letters, October 23.](#)
6. See chapter 3 of C Knight *Blood relations: menstruation and the origins of culture* London 1991.
7. [L Sims, 'Stonehenge and the Neolithic counterrevolution' Weekly Worker October 9.](#)
8. [D Craig, 'The communist fight for one party' Weekly Worker November 6.](#)

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