

Ten Blokes That Failed to Shake the World

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This article started life as a talk one of us gave to a small group of marxists who meet at Birkbeck College in London. A number of serious criticisms have been made of it, many of which we agree with. However, we stand by the thrust of the argument, and publish here a slightly edited version.

What does it mean to be a communist today? We expect there are many answers to this question, depending on what one understands by the term communism. But where we come from, communists are people who have taken and continue to take a principled stand not just against bourgeois rule and the capitalist system, but also against those who claim to stand for socialism or communism but whose political practice supposedly reveals their ‘leftist’ or ‘bourgeois’ nature. Some have even made the logical leap and contend that the politics of Karl Marx were bourgeois.¹ Our basic contention is that this position is not as radical as it sounds, and is more often than not empty posturing.

Defining exactly what ‘leftism’ is and situating it historically is no easy matter. The term ‘ultra-left’ is equally problematic. But we think we will be well enough understood by the readers of this journal if we say that by the ultra-left we mean all those groups and individuals who use such concepts as ‘the left-wing of capitalism’ to distinguish their practice from that of other socialist and marxist (leftist) parties. Depending on your point of view, this is either the thin red line that distinguishes genuine communism from bourgeois leftism, or ultra-left childishness that refuses to accept a few steps of real movement over the immediate application of the ‘maximum programme’.

Let’s kick off with a quote from the German ultra-leftist Otto Ruhle. In his ‘Basic Issues of Organisation’, he says:

Those who have grown old within the traditional forms of struggle do not reflect that everything in the world is only good and proper in its own time. Once that time is past, what was good becomes bad and what was proper becomes misguided; sense becomes nonsense, merit becomes liability.

Ruhle is attacking leftism from the point of view of communism and revolution at a time when the idea of a working-class revolution didn’t seem mad. We agree with what Ruhle is saying, but in a modern context, perhaps it is ultra-left thinking, which may well have been ‘good and proper’ in its own time, that has become ‘nonsense’, if not actually influential enough to be a ‘liability’.

One of the things that provoked our drift away from the appealing formulas of ultra-leftism was Mark Steel’s book *Reasons to be Cheerful* – a truly excellent political memoir from the point of view of an SWP member, covering a 25-year period from punk to New Labour, taking in the Miner’s Strike, the Anti-Nazi League and the anti Poll Tax struggles. We first read the book as convinced ultra-leftists, whose hatred of the SWP was surpassed only by a hatred of the bourgeois mode of production. But at the end of his book, we were forced to ask, What’s actually wrong with all this? Steel described in some detail what SWP (‘leftist’) activity involves. And, even making allowances for omissions and the one-sided nature of his account, we’re still puzzling. From Steel’s point of view, the purpose of the SWP was to support and help organise struggles and demonstrations and so on, striving to build them into a mass, organised movement, and, at the same time, build support for socialism (and the SWP). There is a tendency, in some of the cruder ultra-left thinking, to portray this work as a conscious effort to derail ‘genuine’, radical, working class struggle, and take it to a safer (bourgeois) terrain. The obvious question here is, if the working class

can be derailed and confused by a force as minuscule as the SWP, then what kind of a force is it anyway?

In another of his books, Mark Steel caricatures the ultra-left response to leftist activity as being like a group, with a national membership of nine, turning up to the storming of the Bastille with leaflets entitled 'Why We Aren't Supporting This Demonstration'. It's the political equivalent of the Harry Enfield character who, in a ludicrous show of one-upmanship and posturing, continually declares himself 'considerably richer than yow'. Our political activity has never amounted to much more than going up to bemused people on demonstrations and handing them a leaflet that says:

This is all very well, and well done. Jolly impressed. But, just to let you know: we are considerably more revolutionary than yow.

Still, it could be worse. We once saw members of the Communist Workers Organisation standing on the side of a demonstration with a loudhailer, shouting, 'No War But The Class War!' at people as they walked past. This was reported in their press in glowing terms, saying they were pleased to see that some elements on the 'bourgeois' demo were at least delivering a clear class message.

But having a pop at the CWO is too easy. Let's turn instead to a key ultra-left figure, Anton Pannekoek. In his 'Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics', he says this:

The source of the recent tactical disagreements [he meant differences within the German SPD, between figures like Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg] is clear to see: under the influence of the modern forms of capitalism, new forms of action have developed in the labour movement, namely mass action. When they first made their appearance, they were welcomed by all marxists and hailed as a sign of revolutionary development, a product of our revolutionary tactics. But as the practical potential of mass action developed, it began to pose new problems; the question of social revolution, hitherto an unattainably distant ultimate goal, now became a live issue for the militant proletariat, and the tremendous difficulties involved became clear to everyone, almost as a matter of personal experience.

Like Ruhle, he is arguing for an ultra-left, anti-reformist, revolutionary position. But he is doing it in the context of a time where, as he puts it, 'new forms of action have developed in the labour movement, namely mass action'. Pannekoek's comments, we would argue, make sense against this background.

Can the same point be made today? Where is the 'mass action' that would make sense of this political position? No one could argue that today we are in a situation where the problem of socialism is a 'live issue', 'clear to everyone ... as a matter of personal experience'.

We are, rather, living through a time where the working class movement is so weak that most people are led to doubt its very existence. A time of despair and irony, where the very idea of social progress sounds hopelessly old fashioned, even dodgy.² The idea of socialist revolution has again retreated, in Pannekoek's words, into the position of an 'unattainably distant ultimate goal', and the question of what it means to be a communist in such times must be addressed realistically. Paul Foot, analysing the activity of Karl Marx, makes a similar point in his book *The Vote*. We can only imagine what harsh words Marx would have for people who demanded 'socialism, and nothing but' whatever the circumstances.

John Sullivan, in his pamphlet 'As Soon As This Pub Closes', asks a similar question, and wonders what, if there is 'no link between immediate struggle and socialist objectives', an individual can do apart from joining the SWP. If there's no mass action, why not join the sect that seems to have most success in agitating for it, whatever your reservations about that sect's particular ideology? Sullivan's answer to this question is attractive. The ultra-left response to leftist sects sometimes amounts to dismissing them as mad, bad and dangerous to know: theoretically clueless, mentally unstable and, well, bourgeois. Sullivan, instead, urges us to understand them in terms of the social conditions that produced them, and concludes that leftist sects, like religion, are the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and that they'll only disappear when the world begins to change.

Should we apply the same thinking to ultra-left sects too? Are they a harmless diversion from the cruelties of capitalism? Perhaps. The ultra-left portrays itself as the unsullied guardian of communist ideas, but these ideas too were products of specific social circumstances, and ultra-leftists understandably cling on to them for solace in a heartless world. Speaking personally, they strike us as a suspiciously neat solution to the contradiction that arises when one is committed to militancy and communism in theory, but lives a relatively comfy middle-class lifestyle in practice. Sometimes, to hang onto the gains of our class and our personal gains as individuals, you need to keep your head down.

But Sullivan's argument still strikes us as too fatalist. He says all this will change when the world begins to change. What do we do in the meantime? Pull up a chair and put the kettle on while we wait for the upturn? As human beings, of course, we need to cling onto our utopian dreams, but, as marxists, we must also carve out a path for practical action in the present. This dialectic between utopia and practical action was summarised nicely by the historian EH Carr in his series of lectures that was published as 'What is History?' Carr said that, in a time of doubt and despair, it is particularly important to set out an understanding of the present AND a vision for the future. Utopia and reality, he said, were two essential facets of political science, and 'sound political thought and sound political life will be found only where both have their place'.

So let's not be too harsh on the ultra-left. Their vision of communism is what has kept us going in politics. What remains to be done, however, is to carve out a sound political life that is about more than reading texts, and nattering, and handing out patronising leaflets.

An important reference point in helping us to think about these questions is Rosa Luxemburg. She is an interesting, perhaps a key, figure in these debates because, almost uniquely, she is claimed by both the left and the ultra-left as 'one of ours'. This very fact should be enough to nail the claim sometimes made that the ultra-left is not a part of the left at all. Some people object to the term 'ultra-left' for this reason. It sullies the ultra-left by connecting it to leftism. Leftism, they argue, is bourgeois nonsense, whereas genuine communist theory and practice is separated from it by a clear – if thin – red line.

We can't make any sense of this claim. It seems clear to us that the ultra-left is both historically and theoretically inextricably connected to the left. Its ideas arose as part of the left. The SPGB in this country, for example – the sect we used to be members of – can be seen as an ultra-left split from British social democracy. The Communist Left clearly came out of Bolshevism and European social democracy. It's certainly true, we think, that both Bolshevism and social democracy degenerated into what the ultra-left now call the 'left-wing of capital'. But this phenomenon, where working class oppositional movements become co-opted as part of a movement for a healthier capitalism, was obvious even in Marx's time, as his analysis of struggles for a shorter working day in *Capital*

makes clear. Recognising the tendency and denouncing it doesn't make it any easier to deal with in practice.

And anyway, if it's true that these working-class movements were co-opted by capital, what of the ultra-left? Far from continuing the good fight as the only remaining true communists, as they portray themselves, we would argue that they were merely left marooned, ineffective and isolated, on the ultra-left of a society increasingly dominated by capital. The ultra-left's main audience and constituency had gone over to the other side. So what remained? The ultra-left simply became a disloyal opposition to leftism, existing in much the same relationship as Trotskyism did to Stalinism – if on a smaller scale. The idea that the objective decline of the left – the collapse of 'Communism', the decline of social democracy – would lead to a rejuvenation of 'genuine' communism, unsullied by leftism, has, so far at least, proved to be a delusion. How could it be otherwise? The death of the dog has also killed off the fleas.

We have, of course, in the meantime, seen the rise of new oppositional movements, such as the anti-capitalist/anti-globalisation movements, the World Social Forum, the anti-war movement, and so on. But the influence of the left does not seem to us to have gone away, despite over-excited claims to the contrary. We think this is fundamentally because the questions that leftism raises have not gone away. They may have been wished away with simplistic formulas by the ultra-left. But they have not been transcended.

To go back to Rosa Luxemburg, you sometimes get the impression from ultra-left groups that her writings on the question of Reform or Revolution gave a simple and satisfying answer, namely, 'Er, revolution, please.' In fact, she argued, in short, that the one was the battleground where the working class was schooled and prepared for the other. In a time when it seems clear that the working class is not organised for reform or for anything else, to carry on with the, 'Er, revolution, please', demand seems a bit bonkers. The reform/revolution problem has not been solved, and is not in danger of being solved any time soon.

Perhaps, in this light, the work carried out by the left doesn't look like such a bad idea after all: struggling, if often in vain, for reforms; engaging in 'consciousness-raising' exercises; organising coalitions against capitalist war; struggling to create a climate where the idea that we can fight back and win doesn't look mad, where we can begin to heal the crisis of social vision, where an alternative to capitalism begins to seem plausible and on the agenda. As Kenan Malik puts it, human beings are conscious agents who realise themselves through projects to transform themselves and the world they live in. And if revolution isn't on the cards, then we'll just have to lower our sights.

To conclude, we think that the ultra-left is like a boxer who takes to the ring and doesn't punch his opponent because he knows that only his big right cross will knock his opponent out. But the opportunity never arises. As anyone who knows anything about boxing could tell you, such a boxer will always lose to the guy who knows the art of the jab, the art of the little dig in the ribs. But worse, to stay with the analogy, imagine a boxer who didn't do any sparring or training, because he thinks his one-punch knockout is so deadly, there's just no need. This boxer, too, will always lose to the man who has sparred and lost, and fought, and lost, and gained the necessary experience to fight. As Carlo Rotella put it in his book *Cut Time*, boxing conducts an 'endless workshop in the teaching and learning of knowledge with consequences'. And the boxing gym, as Loic Wacquant put it in his book, *Body & Soul: Notes of An Apprentice Boxer*, is a 'school of morality ... that is to say, a machinery designed to fabricate the spirit of discipline, group attachment, respect for others as for self, and autonomy of the will that are indispensable to the blossoming of the pugilistic

vocation'. Perhaps we could think of left-wing sects, and organising in the workplace, and the fight for reforms, and the fight against war and fascism, and so on, as being like the boxer's gym. No one's saying this is perfect or The Answer. But no one ever learnt how to swim without getting in the water.

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¹ See John Crump's critique of Marx at http://www.geocities.com/Athens/acropolis/8195/marx_critique.htm

² Actually, we're nowhere near as gloomy about the prospects for radical politics as this makes us sound. But our point is that these prospects are unlikely to seem exciting or worthwhile if you're waiting for a movement that lives up to ultra-leftist expectations.