

## POLITICS AND THE STATE

RMT EDUCATION CENTRE, DONCASTER, SEPTEMBER 6-8 2013

Friday Sep 6<sup>th</sup> Roger Seifert's Key Lecture.

### Politics

People are often angry and frustrated about politics. White macho workers who are militant trade unionists can/may have right wing views.

For many of us the Nation State is a stable notion giving control/power/authority.

Our world starts with the fundamental requirement of survival. Almost forgotten in U.K. Roger goes to Malawi where many are two days away from death by starvation. Even now the President's palace is boarded up.

Roger asks rhetorical questions. In the time of our early ancestors who got to eat when there was scarcity? Would it be the skilled or less skilled, would it depend on age or gender? What is the origin of justice and fairness?

He gives an example of three children and an inherited violin. Does the one inherit who values its appearance, the one who can play it or the one who made it? This can lead to the question of who gets healthcare and who doesn't?

Back to the Ice Ages wall paintings and magic were probably thought to help hunting. A class of people would develop who claimed special powers (priests). Rules and Authority followed so if rules are broken then luck is changed (evil spells)

Out of Africa developed a political class and migration was driven by shortage of resources.

On the question of ownership there are two alternatives – all is owned in common or none is owned in common. The Communist and Socialist movements favour the first but the idea of private property was created by pressure.

Roger asks "Do I own my daughter?" Dowries were invented to attract the highest bidder.

What are the benefits of becoming and staying an owner?

In 1834 Engels wrote about the English Working Class. The start of industrialization had produced great pressure on resources and rural people were set against urban people. Today the pressures are on the NHS and Primary school places amongst other things.

### Land, Labour and Capital

- Land attracts rent as income (landlords)
- Capital attracts profit as income (Capitalists)
- Labour attracts wages (workers).

There must be a market for central economic functions. Soviet Russia was brought down by too strict enforcement of principles that led to no markets. Before the Labour market there was a slave market. The emancipation of slaves led to the development of the working class.

### Workers

- Work is exchanged for wages
- Some work is social and some is economic. Workers include doctors and lawyers and the so-called professional class.
- Wages include bonuses, overtime, allowances and deferred wages are pensions.

Many people assume they are middle class but Roger denies this as anyone who sells their labour is working class not just manual workers. This class is in a numerical majority. Why are

they ruled by a minority? How free are workers to stop and leave employment? This is the “loaded gun” paradox. You are free to leave but will be shot if you do.

Conclusion: If workers stop working their income stops so there is a power imbalance. Freedom is distorted.

Politics is the identification of interests within the labour movement. If labour is divided as in Syria at present this gives more power to the rulers. (Divide and rule).

### States

In a post imperial era we are a nation state identified by geographical boundaries. There can still be deep divisions due to race or religion etc. In the U.K. we are a sovereign state with the same punishment in any area.

Failed states have a writ of State that is not consistent and is controlled by brute power. Even a Federal system is a central state.

The State is NOT neutral (law courts, police and army). It is an instrument of the class system.

The State is not the same as the government. Even with Obama only 50% turned out to vote.

The Secret Service plotted to overthrow Harold Wilson. Sometimes a leader is assassinated.

### Features of Neo-liberalism

We are all under attack under the present government. The NHS is undermined, and the “undeserving poor” and those on benefits are denigrated. The more the press clamours the more the working class is divided. Neo-liberalism is the new face of the right wing.

### Democracy, State, Revolution.

- The State requires legitimacy to survive in a peaceful manner.
- The State can be a dictatorship or be ruled by religion. This is often a sham democracy.
- There has been an historical battle over ‘Rights’ whether human or democratic. Power is only handed over grudgingly.
- Revolution replaces a whole class with another.

The State represents class interests and forms a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie or the proletariat. National interest is constructed to hide class interests and involves national identity and citizenship.

Rights involve the right to a living wage, the rights to have an abortion, legal rights etc.

### Question Time

- Why call Financiers workers? Answer: are using energy and it is economic labour.
- What is the definition of the ‘right to work’? Ans: this means the dignity of work and work should have a use.
- Which came first – government or the State? Ans. States evolved around banking and to protect the flow of capital. Disorder in Greek times was suppressed by force. A government has dominion but needs legitimacy. In Thatcher’s time the State became stronger.
- Can you be explicit about your definition of a worker? A worker sells labour for money. A worker is exploited and profits go to the boss.
- John’s notes say that Engels wanted to free the wage slaves but deep divisions are deliberately cultivated by the State and by the rulers of the working class. The heart of politics is State control and the State SHOULD be neutral. In practice it does divide and rule. It is interesting that a democracy can elect a non-democratic government which

- happened in Turkey and Egypt.
- Capitalism will never allow a left wing government to survive.

Saturday September 7<sup>th</sup>.

9.30 Questions for Roger Seifert.

What is a worker?

How do you make your living is a fundamental question. To Marx the relationship was uneven. You need work and your employer needs you but individuals are weak. Only collectively are workers strong (Trade Unions).

If you own land or property you are not working class. Cultural status is less important – liking classical music or museums is irrelevant.

Apathy gives victory to the ruling class.

Roger takes Malawi as an example as it is de-industrialised but has strong trade unions. The monetary fund helps since agriculture failed. Only 10% are in work and there is much corruption with people teetering on the edge of starvation. The repressive nature of the regime is hidden. The people are too weak to sustain action.

Politics is how to organize the working class e.g. Occupy movement or the shop occupation. It does not need to involve violence. General strikes do work to improve conditions and pay.

The police are not allowed to strike but have had a ballot about that. They are clearly working class and protect against social disorder. They have had a march through London to protest about pay and conditions.

Unions are pushing Labour Party into more power and want more power delivered. Miliband dithers because he has serious doubts about unions. We all need a clearer view of the role of the State.

What are the roles of International business and finance? Roger replies “Why do multinationals give huge amounts of money to politics? It is because they are sensitive to public opinion. Take Unilever as an example. It has a “feelgood factor” It lost money due to a strike by its workers in Pakistan. Worldwide they have decided to recognise trade unions. There has been pressure from the U.N. on this topic.

Vic Brunt comments that councils do their “dirty work” inside local government and corruption is unavoidable. Roger replies that we first need a Labour Government as a necessary condition but even that is not sufficient for progress.

John Kay gets involved in the discussion about the development of the living wage and the fact that RMT pulled out of the Labour Party. This is still an open sore.

Labour has to be a well organized sustainable opposition and it is fighting a State that is well funded and structured.

Roger is confident that the distraction of splinter parties will fizzle out by 2015 as that election is SO crucial. The far left have not been sustainable. Roger dislikes nationalistic parties and he asserts that Salmond is funded by big business (Tories). The SNP is not easy to categorise. It is more like Lib-Dem and is not a party of public ownership.

**PUBLIC OWNERSHIP IS A CORE ISSUE.**

Look at what Scotland promises to the EU. In effect BP a private company owns the oil. Roger also uses the examples of other small autonomous nations, Greece, and Ireland which are more vulnerable to big economies.

Roger ends by saying that Labour does not want revolution and that the 2008 financial crash

has dented neo-liberalism. The crash was caused by global shifts and the left wing now is in control of the major Trade Unions such as Unite. We need coherent programmes for renationalizing the railways. Unfortunately the Labour Party in its short history of about 100 years or so has always been wishy washy.

Saturday 11.30 am. Point to discuss provided by Tony Dennis: “*What do we understand by social class? And are there objective ways of defining it?*”

Class was invented in the 1820’s as industrialization developed. Industry led to increased proletarianism. Aristocracy were the capitalists exploiting coal on their land or buying East India shares. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was an underclass as described by Dickens in “*Hard Times*”. The term was invented by right winger Charles Murray.(?)

The next topic on the list was “*Development of the State*”

Roger had mentioned that the first priority was a Labour Government. Then there might be a Quick revolution or a Long Revolution as described by Raymond Williams. Devolution and abolition of the monarchy might also be needed. The achievement of legal equality is particularly significant.

“*Neo-liberalism, producer/consumer sovereignty, power and responsibility*”

It was emphasized that neo-liberalism is a misnomer because it has been around for a while. It may even go back as far as John Locke in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and Adam Smith in 1788 who was part of the Scottish Enlightenment and wrote “*The Wealth of Nations*”.

Essentially neo-liberalism dismantles the labour rights and brings in more casual labour and privatization. Arguably this is more efficient. It certainly brought a repressive regime when the Chartists were crushed.

There is no evidence of improved efficiency with privatization. This is seen today in our hospitals (cleaning and MRSA) catering etc. All that matters is profit.

The sale of council houses was popular but has led to housing shortage today. We need to agree that some things are inappropriate for privatization or sale. These include cemeteries and sports fields, the Post Office, the Probation service and Air/Sea Rescue.

*Producer/consumer sovereignty*

Degree of choice is illusory. Advertising has made our choices associate with our status. This is damaging to susceptible youngsters who can be bullied if they don’t conform or wear inferior brands.

Tony Dennis recommends a book by Ralph Miliband (Ed and David’s father) called “*Socialism for a Sceptical Age*”. He suggests that we need a planned market reformed Cooperative Sector. Marx had realized that experiences in the workplace affect life satisfaction and can lead to hooliganism and violence .

Vic says that there are fixed attitudes in the electricity industry where he worked. Management comprised retired army officers who didn’t want discussions with the workforce. Not until 1970’s was participatory management in fashion. The Trade Unions regarded these as a sop.

*Power and responsibility.*

Power is being centralized. Ministers put up hands and gave hospitals budgets. They gave doctors power to make decisions as in education. Education is seen as an investment akin to buying a house. There is stratification with stress on vocational education separate from the social elite who concentrate on ideas.

Saturday 7.45 group discussion.

*“Nature of the State. Weak government, strong States. Have States changed and if so, how? Social citizenship and the welfare state.”*

Roger represented the State as repressive in order to perpetuate class rule. Marx and Engels thought that is more flexible. For instance we do have a Welfare State (Education, pensions, NHS) and these were extracted from the capitalists under pressure after the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war. At the same time the GDR was an alternative to West Germany but the division was brutally enforced.

Another view is that there is a constant tug of war between political parties and employers with the State being in charge of the contested area. It is potentially armed with powers of coercion. In the U.K. there were changes from the time of Henry VIII.

We agree that States have changed especially since the establishment of the Welfare State. Reforms have been accommodated and there has been pragmatic adaptations. Remember that Welfare State was invented at a time of high employment and it needs this to work smoothly.

Other changes in the State are its admissions of past wrong-doings and injustices. The case of Stephen Lawrence is an example.

We conclude that the State is a necessary evil.

Sunday September 8<sup>th</sup> 9.30 am

*“What might a non-capitalist economy and state look like? What sort of political strategies might be necessary/available to bring it about?”*

J.K. brings up Cuba as an example of a non-capitalist economy and state. Philip Guy attacks the system strongly saying it is repressive and authoritarian. He asks if we can transcend human nature and can we go beyond hierarchy. He reminds us that a lot of experiments have failed.

Vic says that Russia was cemented by antagonism from the rest of the world. He thinks Cuba is under immense pressure from U.S. He too recommends Ralph Miliband's suggestions to reduce privatization and says it is essential to have public ownership of utilities.

Phil Thompson brings up examples of Venezuela and Norway also China.

Tony reminds us that we have to be aware of psychological dynamics and that the situation in other countries is different to ours. We still have not had a full scale revolution as many of them have.

He asks “Why do revolutionary regimes often start off so well and then degenerate into corrupt societies?” Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power in 1917 on the premise that Germany would join and strengthen them. It was done in a rush expecting it to be temporary. We all remember Hungary and its invasion.

We probably need a mixture of cooperative ownership and mixed economy. Vic thinks that public ownership after the war was done from top down and it did result in better working conditions and wages but the break with the past was too abrupt. Remember that the country was bankrupt. It was a miracle it happened.

Scandinavian Social Democracy. Sweden made a rapid change from repressive regime. It changed from a Teutonic society to a more humane one.

Linda reminds us of the book “The Spirit Level”.

Our next course is on Scandinavian politics in November.