

**The theory and practice
of the Socialist Workers Party:
a critical assessment**

By Phil Sharpe



Movement for a Socialist Future

PO Box 942 London SW1V 2AR

www.socialistfuture.org.uk

msf@socialistfuture.org.uk

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Introduction

By Phil Sharpe

The following collection of articles represents a critical analysis of the views of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) concerning globalisation and imperialism. Why is it important to develop this type of critique? Firstly, globalisation and imperialism represent crucial aspects of our understanding of the world today. So how and why we understand their character is of vital importance in relation to the question of whether we can develop a principled political practice. In this regard, the articles will try to show that the SWP have a wrong conception of both globalisation and imperialism, and this is the result of upholding an unprincipled political practice that rejects the necessity of a revolutionary theory and practice.

The SWP are presently the most influential 'Left' group, and this means what they say and do is considered by significant numbers of people as an expression of Marxism. Hence an important purpose of these articles is to show that the theory of the SWP is effectively against an intransigent Marxism, and instead upholds a formal Marxism. This is in fact based upon an increasing acceptance of the role of the capitalist nation state as the basis for a reformist political practice. The rest of the introduction will outline important flaws on the SWP's theoretical approach, and this outline will hopefully be of use in the process of study of the following articles.

The standpoint of Alex Callinicos, the main proponent of the SWP on questions of globalisation and imperialism, is opposed to the materialist and dialectical approach of revolutionary Marxism. The materialist view of Marxism maintains that the material world is the primary basis for understanding the role of human practice and consciousness. Thus human practice is based upon a relation with nature in order to meet material needs, and specific social relations become the historical basis for realising these needs.

Consequently, this material and social being of humanity is the primary and objective basis for understanding the subjective role of consciousness. In contrast, Callinicos upholds a philosophical stance that adapts to the idealist view that consciousness is the primary basis for grasping the relation between human practice and consciousness within the material world. This view is expressed in the conception that globalisation is essentially nothing more than the expression of the policy of particular capitalist nation states and governments.

In other words, for Callinicos - and therefore the SWP - globalisation is essentially nothing more than something ideologically adhered to at the level of the consciousness of particular capitalists and reactionary politicians. This suggests that it will be possible to overcome the reactionary consequences of capitalist globalisation by adopting another policy within the limits of capitalism, such as a return to welfare state Keynesianism. Consequently, there is an important theoretical and political connection between Callinicos's philosophical adaptation to idealism and his effective adherence to a reformist political standpoint.

In contrast, a principled Marxist standpoint recognises that globalisation is not an ephemeral and transitory phenomena that is essentially constituted at the level of consciousness, or the particular policy of specific capitalists and politicians. Instead globalisation represents the present structural development, or social being of capitalism, with regards to the processes and tendencies of change within the imperialist stage of world capitalism.

The economic and material content of globalisation is expressed by the competitive and contradictory domination of transnational capital, which is based upon the transformation of national monopoly capital and finance capital. But in his analysis of globalisation and imperialism Callinicos makes no analytical mention of the importance of transnational capital, and so his approach is based upon an idealist emphasis upon the importance of what occurs at the level of the political superstructure.

This means that the primary relation of the economic structure to the political superstructure is inverted in an idealist manner. Hence the role of the nation state is examined by Callinicos in terms of a geopolitical methodology that abstracts out the important economic and material role of the transnational corporations. The strategic conclusion of this idealist stance is a reformist call for changes and modifications at the level of the political superstructure, whilst essentially leaving the social relations of the economic structure intact. So Callinicos makes no effective call for the social and co-operative ownership of the transnational corporations by the producers, and is instead concerned with more modest changes at the level of the political role of the nation state.

Secondly, the approach of Callinicos is opposed to the dialectical standpoint of Marxism. The materialist dialectical approach of Marxism attempts to show the importance of the contradictions of material reality. In contemporary terms this standpoint is connected to showing the rich, complex and concrete importance of the contradictory antagonistic relations between capital and the role of the producers. The strategic conclusion made by Marx about this contradiction was to show the historical necessity for social transformation and the transcendence of the exploitative character of this social relation.

But Callinicos's non-dialectical approach means that he often denies the importance of this social contradiction and instead defends the more abstract contradiction of nation versus the people. The result of this non-dialectical standpoint is to defend a populist "anti-imperialism" that glosses over the political necessity to overthrow the imperialist nation state and replace it with a state based upon the democratic will of the producers. Instead the 'anti-imperialism' of the SWP is connected to support for pressure group politics, of trying to change the policies of the capitalist nation state rather than strive to overthrow this state.

How can we explain this non-dialectical standpoint? We have already referred to Callinicos's reluctance to recognise the primary importance of the material contradictions of reality. But another important aspect is that Callinicos refuses to recognise the dialectical process of the transformation of quantity into quality. He disregards the importance of qualitative leaps, such as the transition from capitalism to socialism. Callinicos prefers to conceive of transition in more narrow and rigid terms of changes at the level of quantity, or within the present economic and political system of capitalism.

Indeed in general Callinicos has a static and non-changing view of reality, such as expressed by his refusal to recognise the important economic change from the period of the domination of monopoly capital to the situation of the present domination of the transnational corporation. Thus Callinicos combines distrust of the importance of the new with adherence to a dogmatic and vulgarised conception of the Leninist theory of imperialism. The political result of this ideological conservatism is a refusal to acknowledge the new, revolutionary and qualitative possibilities for socialist transition based upon an increasingly interdependent global economy.

Thirdly, Callinicos also upholds an inconsistent and eclectic standpoint that is expressed by the pragmatic view that what works is what is valid. Hence if it is occasionally useful for the purposes of polemic and debate, Callinicos will accept that globalisation is important. But this formal recognition is combined eclectically and paradoxically with the opposing view that globalisation has been 'overrated'. In other words, Callinicos is quite prepared on the grounds of what is useful at a particular moment in time to uphold a stance of having his "cake and eat it".

This point is shown most graphically by his adherence to two theoretically conflicting abstract and concrete models of capitalism. All of these inconsistencies are yet another illustration that his approach does not represent a principled methodology, but instead is a collection of often contrasting principles and premises. However, the result is consistent - he upholds a reformist political stance whilst using formal Marxist terminology.

Some of the ideas in the following collection of articles will now be summarised in a manner helpful for the reader. In his *Anti-capitalist Manifesto*, Callinicos identifies globalisation as a policy. If globalisation is a policy, then the strategic assumption is that it can be changed without the overthrow of capitalism. Callinicos then tries to defend his approach in programmatic terms by outlining what he calls a Transitional Programme, but this has nothing to do with Trotsky's revolutionary Transitional Programme of 1938.

Instead he outlines what are essentially reformist demands that are about the modification of capitalism, rather than premised by the necessity for its overthrow. In order to reconcile his stance with formal Marxism, Callinicos eclectically shifts between an immediate practical model that upholds reformism and an abstract model that formally conceives of the necessity of revolution and socialism. Callinicos' stance is most compatible with the right-wing of the anti-capitalist movements, and is critical of what could be an emerging left-wing. Callinicos also vulgarises Lenin's theory of Imperialism, in order to reduce its economic and political complexity to a geopolitical emphasis on the struggle between nation and nation. This results in a populist anti-imperialism that upholds reformist politics of putting pressure on New Labour to change policy.

The political and tactical implications resulting from the flawed conception of globalisation and imperialism are shown in a recent article by Lindsay German following the massive February 15th demonstration opposing war against Iraq. She is a prominent leader in the Stop the War Coalition. Using what seems to be radical terminology that denounces Blair and New Labour for its immorality, German's stance is essentially no more than the ethical socialism of a Tony Benn variety. The result is the call for pressure group politics that still aim to reform present policies rather than aim and connect the present struggle to the possibility for struggle against capitalism:

"The Labour government now has no legitimacy on this question. Blair talks about the moral right to wage war, but what he is saying is that we have to take one man's supposed morality against the wishes of the whole people. Therefore if he goes to war he will not be fit to be prime minister. If parliament either cannot or will not speak authentically for what people in this country think about war then people will have to do it elsewhere. The traditions of civil disobedience will be the traditions that people look to. They are not simply going to be prepared to say, we will kick Tony Blair out in two years time - they are keen to do something now in order to stop this war." (Lindsay German: 'Millions say No to War': *Socialist Review* March 2003 p9)

This move towards a form of ethical socialism, as the basis for understanding political tactics, is not accidental, or primarily caused by instant impressions of the significance of the February 15th demonstration. Instead it is in a complex theoretical and political relation to the view of globalisation and imperialism held by the SWP.

For if globalisation is conceived as a policy, and the war drive against Iraq is considered as an imperialist expression of this policy, then the expansionism and military aggression associated with globalisation are essentially based upon the ideas and views of influential politicians such as Bush and Blair. Hence politics and its tactics becomes a question of trying to change the mind of Bush and Blair about the consequences of globalisation. How better to do this than to exert mass pressure based upon denouncing the immorality of Blair and Bush in relation to the possibility of war against Iraq?

Alternatively, if Bush and Blair do not change their minds and policies, the tactic to be supported is then about who can replace them within the ruling class and implement the demands of mass pressure. To demand revolutionary change is essentially denounced by the SWP as an expression of ultra-left sectarianism and ultimatism. This is because it apparently represents the imposition of unwanted aspirations onto a diverse movement that is united only by the aim of stopping the war. Thus the SWP effectively counterpose the united front tactic to the struggle for socialism. The united front becomes

conceived as an expression of developing a mass movement for the winning of reforms, rather than a possible political basis for developing mass struggles for socialism.

German concludes her article with the comment that:

"As people act to change the world, so they experience the feelings of collectivity and solidarity which open them to socialist ideas." In the abstract this comment seems to have some validity, but it is completely vacuous and lacking any political content in meaningful strategic terms. For concretely and specifically, in relation to the strategy and tactics of the SWP, they are putting forward a 'united front' tactic that is immediately about changing the policy of New Labour rather than about trying to facilitate the overthrow of New Labour and advance the struggle for the realisation of socialism.

Instead the SWP's conception of the transition to socialism is divided into an immediate short-term goal of reforms and policy changes and a long-term and distant aim of the actual realisation of socialism. But this very ambiguity about the relation between the short-term and long-term means that their whole strategic and tactical emphasis is upon what is important for the here and now and the possibility for immediate policy change and a changing of course by Blair, or by the successors of Blair.

Indeed, it is significant to note that German is careful not to make any explicit call for the removal of Blair, because this might be conceived as a distraction from the immediate tasks of the diverse united front. Hence, she is contented to express moral outrage with the policies of Blair towards Iraq, and this moral outrage functions as a demagogic and ideological substitute for the lack of any coherent and bold politics in relation to the reactionary role of New Labour. Thus a type of vulgar ethical socialism represents the ad hoc politics of the SWP and the general policy of an inarticulate articulation of the drift towards a complete and consistent acceptance of reformism.

Consequently, on the one hand the SWP tries to sound radical in terms of its ethical socialist terminology because it wants to relate to the dynamism of the growing movement against imperialist war. On the other hand, the real political content of this ethical socialism and a populist 'anti-imperialism' is to try and limit the mass movement to the increasingly right-wing and reformist aims of the SWP.

Thus the SWP actually tries to uphold the illusions, which are bound to be present within a contradictory mass movement of many opinions, in the role and durability of the capitalist nation state. So the SWP acts to ensure that the mass movement doesn't develop beyond these reformist limitations. This means that the SWP is seeking to ensure that the dynamic potential of what is still mainly spontaneous struggle does not become transformed into a conscious revolutionary aspiration for socialism.

It is also important to indicate that in her article, German makes no reference to the political stance that has to be taken if war breaks out. Instead, German calls for civil disobedience. But the central political question will be, what is our attitude towards the struggle between Iraq and the various imperialist powers? The absence of such a response by German is not accidental, because the SWP consider that giving an honest answer to this question is not diplomatic and might disrupt the cohesion and dynamism of the 'united front'. But a principled answer to this question is vital, because it relates to the very future of the mass movement against the war.

For if this question is evaded and avoided, the result may be that under the pressure of imperialist war propaganda not only will the anti-war movement not become consistently anti-imperialist, but it could also fragment and disperse. Consequently, another aspect to the reactionary stance of the SWP is that its claims to be anti-imperialist are in actuality a sham, because it cannot provide a coherent answer as to whether it is necessary to defend Iraq against imperialism.

Instead its whole emphasis is on the minimal standpoint of Stop the War, because on this basis of the lowest common denominator politics it can uphold and defend its unprincipled conception of the "united front". Hence the SWP is not interested in trying to provide principled revolutionary leadership for the anti-war movement. Instead the SWP aspires to gain maximum organisational influence within a mass movement on the basis of not alienating any allies, such as the Labour Left and pacifists.

It is argued in these articles that it is necessary to have a materialist and dialectical standpoint that contrasts with the idealism and non-dialectical approach of the SWP. On this basis we can understand the tremendous importance of the transnational corporations within the contemporary global economy, and why the nation state is becoming increasingly subordinated to the requirements of the TNCs. It is in this context that we can understand the role of New Labour, and why it is idealist and illusory to develop tactics which are primarily based upon changing the mind and policies of New Labour.

Instead despite the political uncertainties involved, Blair and New Labour will continue to act on behalf of the TNCs, and this will involve supporting Bush's war drive against Iraq. Thus the only principled approach towards New Labour is not empty and demagogic moral denunciation, but instead a strategy that seeks to overthrow New Labour and replace it with democratic structures that are based upon the collective will and co-operative power of the producers. This process will obviously involve the need for the social ownership of the TNCs. This struggle against capitalism will involve the struggle for world revolution, which is the only definitive basis for overcoming the alienating power of the imperatives of capital. Only a consistent struggle for socialism can overcome the horrors of war, exploitation and poverty.

The theory and practice of the Socialist Workers Party: a critical assessment - Part I

"Callinicos essentially replaces the class struggle of capital and labour with that of political struggle between the nation state against 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"

By Phil Sharpe

For Alex Callinicos, globalisation does not primarily represent the present structure of world capitalism based upon the domination of the transnational corporations (TNCs), but is rather a policy and ideology. In his *An Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* (Polity Press. Cambridge, 2003) these policies are labelled the Washington Consensus, or a neo-liberal agenda that includes trade liberalisation, competitive exchange rates, privatisation deregulation, and fiscal discipline. (p2)

Neo-liberalism became the ideological orthodoxy of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, and this approach has been administered by the IMF and World Bank in the Third World, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Neo-liberalism has represented a "conscious strategy" carried out by the American administration, the US Treasury, IMF and World Bank. (p3)

This approach has also been accepted by the left-wing of the bourgeoisie and by reformist politicians. Callinicos tends to suggest that globalisation is exaggerated as an economic development, and that it does not represent an irreversible tendency towards greater economic integration. Hence globalisation is considered as tenuous and something that could "break-down". In other words, it is a "contingent" and "reversible process". (p145)

Callinicos argues that the anti-capitalist movement has posed a challenge to the neo-liberal agenda, in particular by the 1999 Seattle demonstration which represented a new level of anti-capitalist militancy. This shows it is possible to challenge, modify and even change the present agenda of world capitalism, he claims. For if globalisation is conceived as basically a policy of governments then it is possible to alter this policy without the need for transforming structural change: "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." (p6)

This view represents a naive optimism that plays up the success of the anti-capitalist movement and correspondingly downplays the resources of capital, in order to propagate the illusion that all that is necessary to overthrow the neo-liberal 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 the neo-liberal agenda, such as the Zapatistas rebellion in Mexico against the NAFTA treaty, and protests in Nigeria against the role of the TNCs, and campaigns against Third World debt, strikes in France against privatisation, mass upheaval in Argentina, plus the ongoing momentum of international anti-capitalist demonstrations.

However, Callinicos equates the advent of the anti-capitalist movement with a development of ideas which challenge the domination of bourgeois ideology. For example, he argues that the movement

represents the ascendancy of a new intellectual paradigm. In this, the philosophical standpoint of materialism is once again triumphant against idealism and the postmodernism view that we can only understand things at the level of image and so not recognise objective material reality.

"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 (the most damaging philosophical critiques were produced during its heyday and seemed to have little effect on its influence) than because the world-wide rebellion against capitalist globalisation has changed the intellectual agenda." (p13)

In other words, the question of the development of a consciousness that can acquire the dynamic of opposing capitalism is primarily located by Callinicos at the level of struggle and practice. Theory is considered as having only a secondary and additional role, and which is not decisive and is more of a supplemental character. Hence theory is not considered as a guide to practice, but is more of a passive expression of the spontaneous dynamics of "anti-capitalism", which is providing its own criteria and justification of movement towards more advanced forms of struggle.

This approach means that postmodernism is not challenged in terms of establishing a real theoretical dialogue which prepares the intellectual conditions to engage with it. A type of intellectual theoretical complacency about the supposedly inherent progressive dynamic of struggle is substituted. But this does not facilitate the development of a viable answer to the question of how to transcend the alienated imperatives of capital as a structure.

Instead, Callinicos maintains in an ambiguous and spontaneous manner that the "logic" of the anti-capitalist movement can resolve these 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. So the role of theory to Callinicos is entirely secondary to the objective momentum and inherent spontaneous logic of practice.

Callinicos contends that any ambiguities within the anti-capitalist movement about understanding and defining globalisation and neo-liberalism can be resolved by going beyond any terminological limitations and defining the movement as anti-capitalist: "Crucially, is the enemy neo-liberalism - that is the policies embodied in the Washington Consensus and the Anglo-American model of capitalism that these policies seek to universalise, or the capitalist mode of production itself? How one answers this question will help to determine the alternative one prefers and strategy required to realise it." (p14)

The structure of capital as globalisation is actually considered as a formal shell and a dispensable outer layer, because it is the policies that are considered as the inner content and essential to the mode of operation of capital. But this is a subjective illusion, in that the structural content of globalisation is based upon the domination of the TNCs. This domination is not strategically challenged in terms of the idealism of Callinicos's approach.

Instead the present policies of neo-liberalism are critiqued and alternatives advocated. But this is still outlined at the level of form and not content, because the real relation between content and form is not established but rather inverted. Hence the actual policy form of capital is considered as the structural content, and the content (the development of the domination of the TNCs) is considered as a secondary form and of strategically secondary importance.

This ideological and idealist inversion between form and content is expressed by a reformist programme that is a substitute for a revolutionary approach. Formally, Callinicos is for the traditional Marxist goals of social ownership, workers control and 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, because the immediate aim is to challenge the policy aims of capital in order to create the conditions for its transcendence in the future.

For to undermine the policy of capital is to undermine its content, and so a transformation of forms will follow this process of transition at the level of content. Callinicos eclectically accepts that a transformation of form leaves the content essentially unchanged and admits that changing the policy

of neo-liberalism means that we are still a "long way" from socialist planning. However, he tentatively "overcomes" this problem by saying that what matters is what is immediate, concrete and practical is to come up with a programme that is essentially a left-wing alternative (reformist!) within the limits of capitalism:

"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." (p132)

Consequently, it is maintained that the logic of spontaneous struggle is towards realising these immediate aims. This is somehow supposed to develop the means and possibilities of advancing beyond capitalism, despite being an expression of an aspiration to just change the policy of capitalism. The strategic question that obviously arises is: how can an actual self-limiting acceptance of the logic of capital make it possible to overcome the integration of these reformist demands, into the structural imperatives of capital.

Callinicos has 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.

Callinicos 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: "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." (p139-140)

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. As a result, the importance of globalisation is considered as secondary in relation to the continuing significance of nation states. Hence if nation states are the "essential" political content this means that a "national" reformist political strategy retains its validity despite globalisation.

Callinicos's strategic conception contains nothing on the importance of overcoming the TNCs in relation to realising the structural, practical and strategic aims of labour in the struggle with capital. Indeed, Callinicos has essentially replaced the class struggle of capital and labour with that of political struggle between the nation state against the people, because this latter formulation suggests that the nation state can be "pressured" and transformed into meeting the objectives of the mass struggles of the people.

The class 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. Instead reforms won by the people from the nation state are considered as what is of "real, "concrete" and "practical" significance.

What is the strategic alternative to this approach? Firstly, it is necessary to recognise that globalisation is the primary basis for the actions of nation states. This does not mean that the state is unimportant and not of strategic and political significance. But it does establish the context and content of the nation state which is increasingly to facilitate the interests of global capital. Hence the crucial political question is not to adhere to an illusory view of trying to win the existing nation state to act against global capital, but rather to act to transform the state through the revolutionary actions of labour.

Secondly, it will be necessary to develop measures which structurally undermine the power of the TNCs, which are an integral aspect of the power of global capital. This question of the smashing of the bourgeois state by revolutionary working class activity is so important, because at present the nation state generally acts as the upholder of the interests of the TNCs. So reformist type pressure on the nation state will not modify this situation in terms of undermining the structural power of the TNCs.

Only social ownership of the TNCs through the co-operative and collective role of the producers by means of democratic planning, can start to convincingly undermine the global power of the TNCs. But because Callinicos does not recognise the structural relation between TNCs and globalisation he has no real programmatic and strategic demands for tackling the power of the TNCs. Instead, he is effectively prepared to leave the power of the TNCs intact, because the "real" political issue is to put reformist pressure on the nation state to implement measures of an "anti-capitalist character".

For these measures are generally of a redistributive content, and not about the structural economic character of globalisation and its integral relation to the role of the TNCs. In other words, Callinicos is reducing Marxism to that of the political economy of utopian socialism, such as the redistributionist approach of Proudhon. For this standpoint ideologically assumes that it is possible to redistribute economic resources (Tax the Rich, etc) without structurally transforming the social relations of the relations of economic productive activity. Callinicos is adopting the utopian and reformist programme of sections of the anti-capitalist movement and dressing it up with formal Marxist terminology.

In the present context, human needs are often inadequately realised in terms of the increasingly globalised economy based upon the primacy of the TNCs, which represents the latest expression of the alienating domination of capital over labour. Hence any possible redistribution - tax the rich and the Tobin Tax - are unlikely to be effective, because they are directed at the level of effects and not the causes of economic inequality. These are located in the character of productive activity, in which the TNCs predominate.

Any reliance on supporting the "good capitalists" against the "bad capitalists", or calling on the nation state to act "beneficially" and "benevolently", is an illusion. What is not being addressed is the important role of the TNCs, who are the most reactionary opponents of anti-capitalism. Only real revolutionary measures by labour against capital can start to undermine the power of the TNCs, and practically implement an anti-capitalist and alternative global agenda.

The theory and practice of the Socialist Workers Party: a critical assessment - Part II

"The strategic result of this opportunism is to create an objective divide between reforms and revolution as an expression of an immediate short-term and long-term goal, or the division between minimum aims and maximum aims"

By Phil Sharpe

Alex Callinicos admits that reformism has problems, in that it may be self-limiting and become incorporated into the present economic and political system: "Easier said than done some might say: engaging with states to achieve reforms might easily lead to the movement's incorporation. This is a real enough danger. The ambiguity of reformism as a political strategy is that it represents both a challenge to the system and a means of controlling that challenge. There is no easy way round this problem. To refuse to seek any partial improvement for fear of contamination by the status quo has always been one of the prime marks of the political sectarian and dogmatist." (p140)

What Callinicos does not ask is why the anti-capitalist movement could become specifically incorporated into the requirements of capital on the basis of his programme. It is for the reasons that have been outlined. His approach does not express a revolutionary logic because it represents idealist and utopian illusions that facilitate adaptation to the present requirements of capital. For the point is that reforms are progressive if their realisation increases the confidence and consciousness of labour to struggle against capital. But, this requires that the reforms are actually based on the material interests of labour and are against the requirements of capital.

This does not mean that the primary aim should be reforms, but reforms can be a by-product of militant struggle against capital. In contrast, Callinicos is proposing measures that do not advance the material interests of labour, in that they represent the criteria of what is acceptable to capital. This is precisely why the so-called reforms are not aimed at tackling the power of the TNCs, but rather are about trying to modify the process of capital accumulation in the "interests" of the working class. Thus the reforms that Callinicos advocates are based upon the supposed reconciliation of the interests of capital and labour.

This is a self-deceiving illusion, because in relation to the material and antagonistic interests of capital and labour it is not possible to realise such a reconciliation in practice. Hence the objective content of Callinicos's reforms - if not his intended result - is to facilitate the subordination of labour to capital because it can always adjust to such measures. In practice, these so-called reforms will not be implemented because they are dependent on the "goodwill" of the nation state, which is not likely to be forthcoming.

The strategic result of this opportunism is to create an objective divide between reforms and revolution as an expression of an immediate short-term and long-term goal, or the division between minimum aims and maximum aims. Nevertheless Callinicos tries to counter this type of criticism, by arguing that he still envisages some type of connection between reforms and revolution:

"As I have already indicated, all the demands listed are directly at odds with the neo-liberal consensus. Even the most moderate - say, a shift from indirect to direct taxation - would seem, from the standpoint of this consensus, to be utterly unrealistic. For all that, these demands aren't just a wish

list to be plucked from the air. They represent responses to contemporary realities, and have all been raised by existing movements. At the same time, the tendency of these demands is to undermine the logic of capital. For example, to introduce universal direct income at a relatively generous level would severely compromise the present workings of the labour market, and thereby remove one of the most essential conditions of capitalist exploitation. In other words, while not necessarily formulated for explicitly anti-capitalist reasons, these demands have an implicitly anti-capitalist dynamic. They are what Trotsky called transitional demands, reforms that emerge from the realities of existing struggles but whose implementation in the current context would challenge capitalist economic relations." (p140)

A strategic paradox emerges. In order to formally defend revolutionary politics Callinicos now has to eclectically insist on the anti-capitalist logic of his reforms, while still asserting that the existing bourgeois nation state will implement these demands. What is implied is that the bourgeois nation state will become the vehicle of a transitional process of ongoing transformation from reform to revolution. In other words, socialist transition is being carried out on "behalf" of the working class by a still bourgeois nation state. In order to give this tenuous strategy some credibility Callinicos has to assume that a left-wing government will be elected that will preside over the bourgeois nation state and start to introduce the necessary transitional reforms for socialism. Hence it is not surprising that Callinicos's strategic model is not the development of Soviet power (workers councils), but rather the Popular Unity Government of Allende in Chile between 1970-1973. (p141)

This to Callinicos was a left-wing reforming government which was not sufficiently intransigent enough against the counter-revolutionary power of capital, and which should have mobilised more consistently to defend itself against reaction. But this does not explain why the Popular Unity government was undecided about what to do in relation to the threat of counter-revolution. For, in the last analysis, the Popular Unity government was still a type of bourgeois regime that defended capitalism, even if the capitalist class was increasingly alienated by its political rule.

The question of defending the Popular Unity government against a counter-revolutionary coup was not about putting political pressure on this government to become a revolutionary government. Instead it was necessary to defend the Popular Unity government in order to tackle the immediate threat of a reactionary coup. But this could only have been organised by the working class developing its own revolutionary initiative in order to enhance the possibility of overthrowing the Popular Unity government after defending it against reaction. Instead Callinicos considers the working class as an auxiliary mass force whose main task is to support and uphold a Popular Unity type government, which is ostensibly carrying out "anti-capitalist" type measures (redistribution - tax the rich) and preparing the possibility for socialist transition.

It is also an illusion to consider that a reformist parliamentary government - however left-wing - can legislate socialism on "behalf" of the working class. Nor does this strategic stance somehow express a modern form of Trotsky's transitional method. For instead of "alienating" or projecting the revolutionary power of the working class onto reactionary social forces, Trotsky's approach was about developing the independent political role of the working class. The aim was to enhance its class consciousness and practical capacity to realise its distinctive class interests. In this context, the role of the working class was not to be a foot soldier of the actions of a "left-wing" reforming government, because this situation could not ultimately advance the victory of labour against capital.

Consequently, the strategic content of workers' control over production could not be objectively realised by measures of a bourgeois parliament, but rather would require the revolutionary mass activity of the working class. Formally, even a bourgeois parliament could accept workers' control, which was what the 1919 National Assembly of the German Weimar Republic did. But only the working class can give a real meaningful content to workers' control in terms of structurally transforming production and practically acting to overcome the alienating domination of capital over labour. Needless to say, the Weimar Republic quickly withdrew its measure of "workers' control".

In other words, Trotsky's transitional approach is about how the working class can relate and connect existing and immediate concerns with the ultimate and conscious revolutionary aim of the overthrow of capital. It is not about a left-wing reforming government somehow introducing an anti-capitalist transitional logic to its measures. Rather only the working class can realise and develop a transitional

anti-capitalist logic to its actions, because it is the only group that has material, objective and potentially revolutionary possibilities.

In contrast, a left-wing government can ultimately only uphold through new hybrid forms (e.g. state capitalism) the rule and domination of capital, because it does not have the material content to socially overcome the power of capital. Instead its political actions, whatever their level of formal anti-capitalist content, will only uphold the rule of capital in new forms and not overcome the domination of capital over labour.

For another transitional approach suggests itself, which is that of following the initiative of an "anti-capitalist" government. This apparently has the option of implementing its anti-capitalist measures by progressively breaking with capitalism, or retreating and ultimately accepting the policy agenda of neo-liberalism. (p141)

In this context, the working class has an "important" political role, but only as support to this process initiated by an anti-capitalist government: "Alternatively, the movement could press ahead in the face of growing resistance from local and international capital....To press ahead would be, in effect, to undertake a revolution....But the latter option would be a revolution not simply in the sense of a systemic transformation: it could only be achieved by overcoming - forcibly if necessary - the resistance of capital and those it mobilised behind it. A movement that followed this path could only succeed by winning the active support of the majority of the population, particularly with the reserves of collective strength that only the organised working class possesses, and by appealing to the solidarity of like-minded movements around the world." (p141)

As Marx pointed out in his writings on the Paris Commune, the bourgeois state is an alienating entity that can ultimately only uphold the interests of capital over labour. Hence if labour is to act in a revolutionary manner against capital it cannot use the already existing bourgeois state. Instead it must act politically to overthrow the bourgeois state and establish a transitory state formation that facilitates the transformation of the economy. Consequently, to conceive, as Callinicos does, of working class revolution as a process initiated by a left-wing bourgeois government of a bourgeois state is an idealist illusion.

Only on the last page of his analysis of strategy and programme does Callinicos conceive of the importance of "democratic processes of self-government" to "combat the excesses of the market", and as an expression of the development of "mass struggles from below". (p142) Indeed he poses the choice between this self-organised economic democracy and the alternative of the logic of the market: "The revolutionary choice is really this: should these democratic forms of self-organisation progressively take over the management of the economy, in order to replace the logic of capital with the claims of need, or should they limit themselves to serving as a humane supplement to the market, in which case all historical experience suggests that the two logics cannot indefinitely coexist and that the empire of the market will, sooner or later re-establish itself." (p142)

This comment is not an expression of what is central and integral to Callinicos's strategy. It is instead secondary and derivative of its main component, which is the progressive strategic logic established by an "anti-capitalist government". Callinicos makes a formal and eclectic concession to the revolutionary tradition of Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky. He does this in a way that tries to reconcile an essentially reformist approach with a revolutionary standpoint through the use of phrases about mass organisation and economic democracy.

But these phrases are given no content in terms of explaining how mass organisations can comprehensively challenge the logic of capital. Instead it is only his strategy of the anti-capitalist logic of reforming governments which is given strategic coherence. So the importance of mass workers' democracy remains at the level of a "good idea". Thus the ultimate political result of these radical phrases about mass democracy is to try and reconcile a reformist and revolutionary approach. But the revolutionary standpoint has no practical content; only the reformist stance has any coherent strategic meaning. Hence revolution is posed by Callinicos as a moral and ethical assumption of his approach.

For it is the reformist path which is presented as being best able to create the necessary momentum for the "break" with capitalism. In this context, revolution is effectively presented as a "last resort" in the

process of overcoming capital. This opportunist view glosses over the important question of revolutionary strategy - the necessity to develop the capacity of labour to be able to transcend the power of capital. For Callinicos, this question is automatically resolved by the approach of reformism and its relegation of the working class into a secondary support of an "anti-capitalist government". Callinicos is showing scepticism and defeatism about the revolutionary potential of the working class within his adherence to "left reformism".

Callinicos concludes with the view that the logic of the anti-capitalist movement is to support this "revolutionary" programme.(p142) But what he is actually doing is reducing revolutionary politics to reformism in order to try and opportunistically obtain popular support within the anti-capitalist movement.

The theory and practice of the Socialist Workers Party: a critical assessment - Part III

"Callinicos has two theoretical models uneasily coexisting together. One is the 'concrete' model which shows that capitalism could improve in terms of economic efficiency and general prosperity by a return to the policy of Keynesianism. The other is the 'abstract' model, which tries to show neo-liberalism as the logical expression of the requirements of capital accumulation"

By Phil Sharpe

Callinicos argues that the neo-liberal policies of the last 20 years have represented an economic failure in comparison to the Keynesian period between 1960-80. (p21-25) He then concludes that at the level of policy neo-liberalism is a failure: "Judged by its own yardstick of economic growth, then, neo-liberalism has been a failure. But from the perspective of the Washington Consensus, the problem has arisen, not from too much privatisation and deregulation, but from too little." (p25)

He is trying to adopt the "common sense" view which shows how neo-liberalism is not able to achieve the aims of economic efficiency and a higher rate of growth. This suggests that an alternative form of capitalism in the shape of a "return to Keynesianism" will be able to perform better. Callinicos does not ask why Keynesianism is essentially located in the past. Significantly, Callinicos does not show that it is in the structural interests of the transnational corporations (TNCs) as to why globalisation is being developed.

What Callinicos calls the policy of neo-liberalism is considered the most viable structural expression of the capacity to extract the highest level of surplus value from labour. The growing internationalisation of production allows for the increasing equalisation of the extraction of surplus value by the cheapening of the cost of labour power in the advanced capitalist countries to a level that is becoming comparatively (not identical) similar to that of the developing world.

But then Callinicos ostensibly disagrees with the call for a return to Keynesianism. Instead he now formally suggests that neo-liberalism is integral to capitalism and expresses its economic limitations: "Others offer a similar, if slightly more radical critique by saying that what's wrong is the prevailing model of capitalism. If only policies were adopted that permitted a return to the more regulated and humane capitalism of the post-war era, then most of the worst ills afflicting humankind could begin to be addressed. A main thrust of this entire book is to challenge this kind of argument. It is capitalism itself and the logic that governs it - a logic of exploitation and competitive accumulation - that is the problem." (p26)

How is this discrepancy explained? It is that Callinicos has two theoretical models coexisting uneasily together. One is the "concrete" model which shows that capitalism could improve in terms of economic efficiency and general prosperity by a return to the policy of Keynesianism. The other is the abstract model, which tries to show neo-liberalism as the logical expression of the requirements of capital accumulation. However, there is theoretical connection established between the two models because they are based upon competing and different premises.

For the Keynesian concrete model is based upon a reformist strategy of the possibility and necessity of state capitalist reforming governments which can administer the capitalist economy in terms of expansion of public expenditure and nationalisation within a welfare state, mixed economy. This

represents the immediate and short-term practical programme of Callinicos. The other abstract model is based on the formal revolutionary adherence to the replacement of capitalism by socialism, but is posed as a long-term maximum goal. Given the contradictory relations between the two models, Callinicos shifts uneasily and inconsistently from one to the other. When he is being "empirical" and "practical" he tends to uphold his Keynesian approach, and when he is being "theoretical" he is generally upholding his abstract model of capitalism.

So when he is outlining the problem of commodification and its connection to alienation, the logic of this is to suggest the necessity to replace capitalism with socialism. (p27-28) But when he outlines the empirical relation of neo-liberalism to financial speculation, the emphasis shifts back to reformist conclusions. For the inherent assumption is that the instability and crisis caused by the rapid movement of finance can be answered by the introduction of currency controls by the nation state. (p29-35)

Indeed, it seems at times that Callinicos is equating the policy of neo-liberalism with the role of deregulated finance capital: "Meanwhile the axis binding together Wall Street, the US Treasury, and the international financial institutions promotes the policies of the Washington Consensus, which open up national economies to foreign investment and make them vulnerable to the fluctuations of the financial markets, and thus more dependent on this axis." (p30-31)

On this basis capitalism can be described as primarily irrational because rapid movements of capital encourage over-investment that results in a reaction and recession. This then suggests it is possible to act rationally and introduce Keynesian style state regulated control on the movements of finance by a nation state.

Formally, Callinicos criticises the assumption that reform and regulation of financial markets suggests that capitalism is still the superior and eternal economic system. (p33) But, in practice Callinicos is also arguing for similar measures as the pro-capitalist Keynesians, which is to call for regulation by the state of the financial markets. This is why he supports control by the nation state of the movement of finance, and upholds the Tobin Tax on financial transactions in order to develop the resources for Third World economic growth.

In relation to his abstract model, Callinicos outlines how capital is based on the exploitation of labour by the extraction of surplus value, and a competitive relation between capitals. (p35-40) The emphasis in this model is about what happens within production, such as the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. Only the exploitation of labour extracts surplus value, and therefore the increased ratio of machinery to labour causes the rate of profit to fall. So if the competition between capitals is based upon increasing productivity by increasing the ratio of machinery to labour, it can result in a decreasing rate of profit and ultimately lead to recession and overproduction. (p38-40)

But Callinicos does not apply this model to the reality of economic activity. Instead his emphasis is on the role of circulation - the rapid flow of money in financial markets - as the main cause of crisis. He outlines how the rapid flow of money led to over-investment in South-East Asia, and which in turn produced recession when money was quickly withdrawn as profits were no longer being made. Also in America the boom was increasingly sustained by financial speculation, and this encouraged over-investment, and so when profits were not at the level expected the result was recession:

"It is this process of uncontrolled accumulation, driven by competition and speculation, that is responsible for the collapse of two of the three largest zones of advanced capitalism into recession over the past decade. From this point of view, the role of financial markets is less as an autonomous source of instability, more as one dimension of a set of interconnected processes driving capitalist economies towards crisis. Marx's own analysis of what he called the 'credit system' seems apposite here: the development of credit money and its availability through the banks and financial markets make it possible to sustain the accumulation process for longer than would be otherwise feasible, but the effect is to postpone - and often to intensify - the onset of the underlying economic contradictions. The financial markets backed by the Fed [US central bank], helped to sustain the American boom but that boom was not merely a speculative artefact: it depended on a real, if limited recovery in profitability, and when the rate of profit began to fall, the collapse of the boom was a matter of time." (p43)

While Callinicos tries to maintain an emphasis on the importance of the rate of profit, in actuality it seems as if the main cause of crisis is the dynamic role of the financial markets, or the uncontrolled movement and increasingly rapid circulation of money. It would seem, therefore, as if the contradictions of capital could be modified by restrictions on the movement of money, which would deprive speculative investment of real returns. Investment would return to rational levels, and so the level of profit would begin to increase and the tendency for the rate of profit to fall would be modified and slowed down, even if not overcome.

This emphasis on circulation as essentially more important than production, is to invert the relations of what is primary and secondary in the understanding of crisis. For it is the problems in the process of extracting surplus value from labour, such as bringing about an overall decrease in the necessary labour time of labour, which is of primary importance. How else is it possible to explain the problem of over-investment in industries without it being located within the difficulties of developing sustainable level of profits?

Indeed even developing super profits (as British Telecom did) does not offset the problem of the falling rate of profit, because investment of super profits could not regenerate a comparable level of profits. Instead the result for BT was loss in the area of new investment, as shown by BT's attempt to expand in the American market. This was also the situation for other companies. In other words, the rapid movement of money as new investment (shares, etc.) could only intensify the crisis, but itself was not the cause of the crisis. This was located in the problem of extracting surplus value.

The conclusion of this emphasis on production is to show that only socialism is the alternative to the anarchic, exploitative and crisis-ridden character of capitalism. In contrast, an emphasis on the primacy of finance is to call for the regulation of financial markets in order to produce a more efficient, reform-minded and profitable capitalism. This is the "concrete" model of capitalism put forward by Callinicos.

Callinicos does show the connection between competitive capital accumulation and the use of the natural world in terms that result in ecological catastrophe. (p44-49) He even shows the role of the multinationals in this process of undermining the environment. (p47-48) This analysis seems to represent the expression of his abstract model of capitalism and the call for revolutionary answers:

"The logic of competitive accumulation thus not merely causes profound economic crises; it is the main force behind the increasingly threatening process of environmental destruction. Trapped in the competitive struggle to gain an edge over their rivals, capitals are driving collectively towards an outcome that portends planetary disaster." (p49) But this conclusion is not an aberration from his general adherence to the more reformist-inclined practical model. For Callinicos has a conception of calling upon the nation state to control and regulate economic activity in the favour of the people - peoples' capitalism - and the question of the environment is part of this reformist programme. This is yet another example of the eclectic tension and inconsistency of his moving between his concrete and abstract models of capitalism.

The theory and practice of the Socialist Workers Party: a critical assessment - Part IV

"Callinicos's stance is limited to opposing a timeless abstraction defined as American imperialism. So he glosses over the important structural connections between American imperialism and the transnational corporations. Instead America is seen as a nation of reactionary geopolitical values and envisaged by Callinicos as the political antagonist of the people of the world"

By Phil Sharpe

Alex Callinicos defines imperialism in a manner which he holds to be compatible with the traditional Leninist theory of imperialism. He maintains that despite the increasing internationalisation of production there is still a predominantly national basis to economic development, and this is upheld by the role of the nation state. This explains the continuation of inter-imperialist rivalry:

"Although the pronounced tendency towards the global integration of capital over the past generation has severely reduced the ability of states to control economic activities within their borders, private capitals continue to rely on the nation state to which they are most closely attached to protect them against the competition of other capitals, the effects of economic crisis and the resistance of those they exploit." ¹ In this context, we can understand economic and political tensions and rivalries between USA imperialism with Germany and Japan, and countries like Russia are also potential imperialist contenders. ²

John Rees, who plays a leading role in the Stop the War Coalition on behalf of the Socialist Workers Party, refines and elaborates this conception. He contends that the international development of the productive forces can only be understood in the context of competition between nation states and rival trading blocs:

"Since capital can only exist as many competing capitals, it still needs a state that can try to stand above the fray and attempt to regulate competition. The move to international capital does not dispense with this requirement, but raises it to the level of conflict between states and trading blocs." ³

What is significant about these definitions of imperialism, is that they are very much based upon geopolitical considerations connected to the important role of the nation state as a protector of national capital. What is missing is an indicator of what is the structural content of economic development. This criteria is important, because it will help to show what has possibly changed since the time of Lenin when the classical theory of imperialism was elaborated.

Lenin showed that the structural content of imperialism was based upon the role of monopoly capital and finance capital, or the merging of industrial and banking capital. Monopoly capital and finance capital tended to be nationally organised, and this was crucial in explaining imperialism because the nation state became a protector of the interests of its "own" national monopoly capital.

The recent globalisation of production and commerce is structurally dependent upon the role of transnational corporations, which are no longer based upon a particular nation state. This does not mean that the role of the nation state has become superfluous, or that inter-imperialist rivalries are transcended, but it does mean that economic development is no longer based upon rival trading and political empires that aim at the protection of the interests of monopoly capital. Instead, because of the

growth of transnational corporations, capitalism has become a more integrated economic system. This is shown by the development of international financial institutions that express this global logic, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Given the transformation of national monopoly capital into transnational capital, it has been possible for the national political representatives of capital to co-operate in unprecedented terms, something that would have been inconceivable in the era of nationally organised and competitive monopoly capital. For it is in the interests of the transnationals that political co-operation and unity is created between the advanced capitalist countries in order to enhance the possibility of exploiting the labour of all countries. This does not mean that imperialism has turned into ultra-imperialism, bringing with it the possibility of a connected, peaceful and co-operative development of capitalism.

Instead the development of global capital represents a new phase in the imperialist stage of capitalism. For what is occurring is the intensification of the exploitation of the labour of those subordinated and dominated countries within the hierarchical levels of the world economy. Imperialism, therefore, remains an expression of a relation of exploitation and oppression of oppressed nations, despite the important gain of political independence in the period of colonial liberation. But the structural content of this imperialism is changing. It is no longer primarily based upon antagonistic and rival national monopoly capitals, but the standpoint of the transnational corporation.

Have the SWP modified their stance in the recent period? The short answer to this question is no. If anything the SWP has become more dogmatic about adhering to the "Leninist" theory of imperialism. In an article about the foreign policy of the Bush administration, Callinicos argues that the tendency towards unilateralism, or a go-it-alone stance, is connected to a geopolitical imperative for American imperialism to maintain its military superiority over rivals like Russia and China:

"Their world-historical perspective leads the Bush team to conclude that a window of opportunity has opened in which they can use the US's present military superiority to improve the long-term position of US capitalism."⁴ However, Callinicos then makes an eclectic qualification to this view, in that he concedes that US foreign policy does not just have this geopolitical aspect of consolidating hegemony over potential rivals, but it is also related to the requirements of globalisation:

"It is important, however, to see that the Bush administration's grand strategy is aimed not simply at maintaining US geopolitical pre-eminence, but at imposing the Anglo-American model of free market capitalism on the world."⁵ So, Callinicos glosses over any theoretical inconsistency between these two comments by reducing globalisation to an ideology or policy. In this manner he can equate globalisation with the exclusive interests of American foreign policy, and therefore tenuously maintain his geopolitical view about imperialism as essentially the rivalry between competing nation states.

How can we explain the inconsistency in Callinicos's view? Empirically, he feels impelled to admit the significance of globalisation and the impact of the growing internationalisation of production and the circulation of money. But, theoretically and politically he has to reduce this empirical admission to the dogmatic views of the SWP about the primacy of inter-imperialist rivalry. Thus he still defines the present role of USA capital as nothing more than trying to maintain an increasingly precarious economic hegemony over inter-imperialist rivals:

"The US's huge military lead over the other powers should not be allowed to conceal the fact that the economic contest, particularly with the EU, is much more evenly balanced. The implication is that the current US supremacy depends on a highly contingent and transitory set of circumstances. It is precisely for this reason that US administrations have had to fight hard to maintain their hegemony - first of Western capitalism, now on a global scale - over the past generation. The Bush administration is seizing advantage of the present conjuncture in order to shift the terms further in the favour of US capitalism".⁶

But an important question cannot be answered by this essentially geopolitical analysis, which explains economic and politics in terms of the competition between rival nation states. This question is: what precisely is American imperialism upholding and defending? The answer to this question is the power and importance of the transnational corporation, which constitutes the structural basis of the increasingly interdependent world economy. In contrast, Callinicos's answer amounts to an evasion

and tautology, because what he is essentially suggesting is that competitive nation states protect the competitive character of capital. This answer does not tell us about the historical context and process of development of this competition.

The unarticulated assumption of Callinicos is that American imperialism, and the various rival imperialisms, are based upon nationally-organised monopoly capital and finance capital. But this assumption is antiquated, because it lags behind recent economic and structural development, which is based upon the evolution of monopoly capital into the transnational corporation. This does not mean that competition has been transcended, but rather competition is now between forms of capital that are not necessarily and organically connected to a national content. In this context, it is possible to consider that far from the national state being compatible with the present structural character of capitalist development, there is instead a contradiction between the nation state and the economic requirements of global capital.

In other words, the state is increasingly becoming an anachronism, or an ideological and political construct which contradicts the requirements of the highest economic trends of capitalist development. The state still acts to protect the interests of capital, but this is carried out in antiquated terms, which means the contradiction between ideological and political requirements and the role of the economic are not resolved. Instead this contradiction is intensified, and so the ideological and political interests of the nation state are in conflict with the requirements of national capital.

In order to try and resolve this contradiction, American imperialism has advocated the policy of unilateralism, to try and assert that the global interests of capital are best served by the military might of America. But this stance has only intensified the political and ideological contradictions between the advanced capitalist countries, because European countries, such as France and Germany, also maintain that they also uphold the interests of global capital. What seems on the surface an expression of renewed inter-imperialist rivalry, is actually a manifestation of the structural problem that the economic process of globalisation has in developing compatible political and ideological forms.

Callinicos contends that globalisation has not transcended the assertion of national interests, such as expressed by the unilateralism of American imperialist foreign policy.⁷ The economic crisis of Germany and Japan in the 1990s helps to explain the resurgence of American imperialism as a power capable of imposing hegemonic and unilateral military action, he argues. Also Russia and China do not yet have the economic power to challenge America.⁸

In this context, the Clinton era could be considered as a transitional era, because multilateral action at the level of the UN and NATO was increasingly replaced by unilateral action. This situation was reinforced by the advent of the Bush administration that was always committed to unilateralism. Since September 11th this stance was extended by the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive strike against "rogue states".⁹ Thus the Bush administration is committed ideologically to Reaganism, and its doctrine of the use of USA military power to suppress potential or actual rivals.¹⁰ A tension has developed, therefore, between a Europe - with the main exception of the UK - committed to multilateral action and a Bush administration based on a commitment to its own unilateral military power.¹¹

This analysis shows that Callinicos has failed in his attempt to combine the "complex mixtures of economic and geopolitical reasons" for the actions of imperialist powers.¹² Instead what he has done is abstract out the importance of the geopolitical reasons for the unilateralism of American imperialism and then project or impose this descriptive analysis onto the process of economic causation. Thereby he has constructed an idealist inverted relation between the geopolitical and the economic. The geopolitical becomes the basis for explaining the economic, rather than the economic being the basis for developing an analysis of the role of the geopolitical.

In contrast, the tensions between American unilateralism and European multilateralism only become consistently explanatory when this situation is connected to the political conflict between different states about how best to defend the interests of global capital. What is the best geopolitical policy that can best uphold the interests of transnational capital? At present, from the standpoint of capital, there does not seem to be any definite and definitive answer to this question, and so the result is political and ideological tensions between France, Germany and Russia with America and Britain. But in the last analysis this tension will not break out into fully fledged inter-imperialist rivalry, because the

structural context is not that of competition between national monopoly capital. Instead it concerns the strategic question of how the nation state of the advanced capitalist countries can best advance the interests of transnational capital.

In relation to the situation in Iraq, Callinicos maintains that the immediate aim of the Bush administration is to show any other possible political antagonists that they will be dealt with punitively like Iraq. It is also strategically and economically important to realise USA's economic control of Iraqi oil in the context of growing distrust between Saudi Arabia and America.¹³ Control of Iraqi oil will advance both American imperialism's economic and geopolitical interests against its European and Japanese rivals:

"Not only would this ease concerns about the US's long term access to oil, it would also increase Washington's leverage over allies and rivals such as Germany and Japan that are even more dependent than the US on imported oil. Once again we see how economic and geopolitical considerations are inextricably interwoven in the grand strategy of US imperialism."¹⁴ Callinicos accepts that there is criticism of the Bush approach within the American ruling class, in that potential allies for coalition building are being alienated by the unilateralist approach.¹⁵ However, despite the risks and problems, the strategy of the Bush administration is not irrational, because it is based on the need to use American military power in order to shift the global balance of power in its favour.¹⁶

In order for this above viewpoint to have any credibility a situation would have to develop, in which the American government directly controlled the Iraqi oil fields, and on that basis control the level of supply to Europe and Japan. But this will not happen, not least because the direct economic role of the state is generally considered by the American government to be against the interests of capital. Instead an important aim of American unilateralism is to bring about control of the Iraqi oil fields by the transnational corporations because the present role of the Iraqi state is considered against the interests of global capital.

The strategic military tensions between America and Europe about unilateral or multilateral action against Iraq are, therefore, not an expression of inter-imperialist rivalries about who could nationally control Iraq's oil. For the governments of both Europe and America are equally committed to realising a situation of enhancing the capacity of the transnationals to control the supply of Iraq's oil. Consequently, a shared economic aim to realise the greater economic integration of Iraq into the global economy has led to strategic military and political differences between Europe and America about how to realise this aim.

Callinicos tries to defend his standpoint by suggesting that unilateralism is the best way to uphold the strategic interests of American imperialism against its rivals. But this contention lacks substance because the world economy is not dominated by nationally competing rival monopoly capital centres. Furthermore, if the world economy was still predominantly based upon rival monopoly capital, it would actually be irrational for American imperialism to rigidly pursue foreign policy objectives by unilateralist means that needlessly alienated allies and potential rivals.

America's unilateralist foreign policy can only be conceived as rational if it is located in the context of strategic differences about what is the best policy to realise the interests of global capital. The American government is preparing to take the risks of renouncing multilateralism precisely because it regards this strategy as increasingly unable to decisively advance the interests of global capital. Consequently, the Bush administration regards the adherence to multilateralism and the UN by France and Germany as support for an ineffective policy that will not enhance the realisation of the objective of upholding the interests of global capital and the transnationals. The present tension between Europe and America is an expression of the fragmentation of the nation state system in relation to the growing economic interdependency of global capital.

Callinicos concludes by commenting that the Bush strategy has resulted in a diverse international opposition to the war drive against Iraq, and led to illusions in the role of Europe limiting the actions of America.¹⁷ That is why the opposition to the war is heterogeneous, and some people have illusions in the UN and global capitalist values, but the logic is for increasing political radicalisation and the development of an anti-imperialist stance. It is necessary to develop a united front of these diverse political forces and provide a revolutionary anti-imperialist leadership, says Callinicos, adding:

"Part of the point of the united front tactic is to unite politically diverse forces in action around a limited common objective: within this united front it is the responsibility of revolutionary socialists both to try to make this struggle as militant as possible and to challenge the political illusions that still tie some of the participants to the ruling order. The political climate today, certainly in Britain, is one where, simultaneously, opposition to the war on Iraq is very broad, but it is the anti-imperialist wing of the movement that is making the running." ¹⁸

Callinicos formally tries to defend revolutionary politics, by opposing any support for Europe against America. In this context, he is trying to deny that the standpoint of the SWP also defends illusions in a progressive Europe against a reactionary America. However, the dogmatic, descriptive and one-sided geopolitical analysis of Callinicos, with its emphasis on the role of American unilateralism, is actually an ideological accommodation to the view that a left-wing capitalist class in Europe can be mobilised against a right-wing administration in America.

By contrast, if we locate the role of the Bush administration, and France and Germany, within the context of defending capital against the interests of labour, then we can develop a more principled internationalist and intransigent stance. On that basis the anti-imperialist necessity to oppose the war against Iraq is connected to the necessity to develop a strategy that facilitates the struggle of the world working class and peasantry against the interests and policies of the transnational corporations and global capital.

In comparison Callinicos's stance is limited to opposing a timeless abstraction defined as American imperialism, and so he glosses over the important structural connections between American imperialism and the transnational corporations. Instead America, as a nation of reactionary geopolitical values is effectively envisaged by Callinicos as the political antagonist with the people of the world.

Callinicos maintains that his approach is based upon the united front, or mass mobilisation around limited and defensive demands which then can develop an anti-capitalist logic. But the conception of the united front, as developed by the early Third International and by Trotsky, was based upon the interaction of principled politics with the need for flexible tactics in relation to the question of mobilising the working class against capitalism.

The dogmatic conception of imperialism upheld by the SWP is not conducive to developing principled politics and providing revolutionary leadership of a united front. In fact, it more resembles the Popular Front developed by Stalinism in the 1930s, where alliances were made across the class spectrum with fatal political results. The SWP is defending lowest common denominator politics in order to try to organisationally obtain the maximum possible influence within a mass movement. Consequently, the SWP is actually opposed to developing the principled politics necessary to transform the anti-war movement into an expression of conscious opposition to both imperialism and capitalism.

Footnotes:

(1) Alex Callinicos: *Marxism and Imperialism Today: In Marxism and the New Imperialism: Bookmarks: London: 1994* p54; (2) *ibid*: p55-61; (3) John Rees: *The New Imperialism: In Marxism and the New Imperialism* p104; (4) Alex Callinicos: "The Grand Strategy of the American Empire" in *International Socialism* Number 97, December 2002 p18; (5) p19; (6) p22 (7) p3-4 (8) p6-7 (9) p8-12 (10) p12-13 (11) p15-18 (12) p5 ;(13) p22-26; (14) p27; (15) p28-30; (16) p30; (17) p31-32; (18) p33-34