

Paying the price for opportunism

Phil Sharpe examines what lies behind the moves by the Socialist Workers Party to form a Peace and Justice Party with representatives of the Muslim community. In the first of a four-part series, he examines the background to mounting criticism of the SWP's methods and its growing internal crisis.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has recently attracted criticism for its apparent secret negotiations with the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain and representatives of a Birmingham mosque to establish a Peace and Justice Party. Lindsay German (one of the SWP's main personalities within the Stop the War Coalition) has admitted that such a party would not necessarily include references to women and gay rights. These were described as a "shibboleth" that should not be allowed to impede political progress. Their omission would, of course, help the SWP reach agreement with the leaders of the mosque.

At the same time, former allies within the SWP-led Socialist Alliance have been purged. The Alliance has now essentially completed its process of transformation into another tame "united front" controlled by the SWP. For example, the respected FBU militant Steve Godward in Birmingham was deposed from his official post in the Alliance for daring to criticise these recent developments. Even close independent allies of the SWP, such as the writer Mike Marqusee, have decided to distance themselves from the SWP.

The SWP leadership considers these bureaucratic actions are integral to the building of the organisation. However, these types of manoeuvres are not halting the long-term numerical decline of the SWP, while the recent annual "Marxism" event was less well attended than in previous years. The fact that the SWP does not seem to have grown despite its prominent position in the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) must be deeply demoralising for an organisation that defines political success in terms of numerical growth. What may seem an illogical process of apparent self-destruction actually represents a profound political logic that is connected to the limitations and nature of the SWP.

The most recent and prominent standpoint of the SWP is based upon adherence to a type of protest politics and the perspective of putting pressure on the New Labour government in order to "stop the war against Iraq".¹ This contrasted with the obligation on revolutionaries to oppose imperialist war by campaigning for the defeat and removal of their own government. This meant working for a "regime change" in Britain. The case for this was reinforced when the Blair government decided to ignore public opinion and join US imperialism in launching an invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The SWP believed that the most crass opportunism and tail-ending of the spontaneous dynamism of the anti-war mass movement would itself result in massive numerical gains and growing influence. Instead the SWP was essentially bypassed by a mass movement that instead preferred to act in accordance with its own initiatives. Many mistakenly drew the conclusion – with the encouragement of the SWP – that politics were not required in making the anti-war movement successful. The result was that while the SWP had an important organisational role within the STWC, it could not transform this influence into direct political leadership and gains for the SWP. Instead the organisation was possibly even smaller than it was before the war. This partly explains the "get rich quick schemes" about the formation of a possible Peace and Justice Party and the purging of the Socialist Alliance.

In the run-up to the attack on Iraq, the SWP acted to ensure that protest politics were upheld and any opposition to it was stifled. For example, at the People's Assembly convened by the STWC in central London in February, they joined with the Stalinist chair Andrew Murray, to turn it to another protest event. They blocked proposals made by supporters of the Movement for a Socialist Future, and others, that the Assembly should become a real and dynamic forum of opposition to New Labour, convened on a regular and nation-wide basis. Instead, the Peoples Assembly was transformed into a rally full of self-congratulatory speeches.

Nothing has changed since the war ended, despite the fact that New Labour was thrown into political crisis by the inability to find WMD and the clear fabrication of the official dossiers. The SWP clings to the politics of pressurising New Labour within the STWC, while its own party line is more "radical", joining in populist calls for "Blair Out". On the basis of trying to deflect criticism by "doing something new", the approach of protest politics has now been combined with a reluctant call for a reconvening of the Peoples Assembly on August 30th. However, the Peoples Assembly is considered to be nothing more than an auxiliary voice to those MPs who are critical of the government on the question of weapons of mass destruction: "The Assembly on 30 August aims to keep the pressure on the government by indicting it for its lies, which in themselves constitute a negation of democracy and proper debate." Accusing the government of lies hardly amounts to a serious challenge to New Labour!

These recent developments show that the crisis of the SWP has an interconnected relation to its opportunist politics. These override any formal adherence – and it is nothing more than that – to the principles of Marxism

and the traditions of revolutionary politics. This contradiction between what they say and how the SWP operates is at the heart of their crisis. Mike Marqusee's criticisms of the SWP are made from an entirely different standpoint. He differentiates between the politics and the bureaucratic approach of the SWP. He writes: "I've never agreed with the SWP's programme or the programmes offered by any of the Leninist groups but that's not the core of the problem. It's not about programme, it's about method."² Hence the question of "the control freakery, the intellectual dishonesty, the causal attitude towards democracy" is, according to Marqusee, shared by other left groups, and is apparently the hallmark of Leninism. This superficial comparison between the history of the SWP and Leninism tells us nothing and has more than a hint of liberal political prejudice about it.

The SWP is defined by its lack of political democracy and an unaccountable leadership. Yet this is a necessary prerequisite of a politics that is based upon the rejection of any self-critical analysis of its political practice. Instead objective reality is always portrayed as something conforming to the subjective aspirations of the consciousness of the leadership. So when the dialectical and contradictory character of objective reality and the class struggle indicates that political developments have not faithfully conformed to these subjective aspirations it is necessary to gloss over these mistakes. Empirical adjustments are necessary to provide the basis for an alternative to what would constitute a truly critical and reflective analysis of the situation. This means that democracy within the organisation is a luxury that is not possible, because democracy might lead to a questioning of the omnipotent role of the leadership and its perspectives.

In this context, the SWP was characterised by the "theory" of the "downturn" in order to explain the various setbacks for the working class between the late 1970s to the early 1980s.³ The militant miners' strike of 1984-85 seems to contradict this theory, and actually required the development of a general strike for its victory. Instead of calling for what was necessary in the form of a general strike, the SWP leadership tenaciously clung to the downturn outlook. This effectively meant that they denied any possibility of a victory for the miners and the downfall of the Thatcher government. Here is an example of how a predetermined and fatalistic theory denied the possibility of any qualitative leaps in the situation. So reality was made to conform to the theory despite the objective intensification of the contradictions of class struggle, because the SWP leadership could not possibly be mistaken. Any dissent was inevitably dealt with in disciplinary terms since it was not possible to overturn this one-sided approach in theoretical terms because of the danger this represented to the prestige of the party's leaders.

The SWP leadership suddenly and abruptly decided in the early 1990s that the downturn had ended. This meant that they called for a general strike in relation to the struggle against pit closures in a situation that was far less favourable. The SWP leadership was only able to achieve these U-turns in policy because it had a membership that was unaccustomed to challenging the leadership. The requirements of a collective commitment to an opportunist political practice could only be upheld by monolithic political methods. As a result, party democracy has always been a luxury within the SWP. This is why various factions were expelled in the early 1970s, and after that were effectively banned by the SWP. This parody of revolutionary political tradition stands in stark contrast to the history of Leninism, which Marqusee uses the example of the SWP to try and discredit.

Leninism has always been characterised by intense internal political discussion and clarification from its earliest days. In 1903, Lenin and other Russian revolutionaries took part in a congress in London that lasted almost a month. The minutes of the 2nd Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party show the most open and frank discussion about the way forward. Lenin bent over backwards to accommodate his political opponents, offering them key positions on the editorial board. In 1917 the Bolsheviks argued fiercely about whether the time was right to launch a revolution. Lenin found himself in a minority and went to the rank and file of the party to win support for his position. In power, Lenin and the Bolsheviks continued this tradition.

To give only one example, the question of signing the Brest Litovsk treaty with German imperialism in 1918 led to three different views: Lenin was for unconditionally signing the treaty immediately; Trotsky favoured no peace and no war; Bukharin called for open defiance and the rejection of the treaty through the possibility of international civil war. These differences were openly debated within the party and soviet organisations, and Bukharin's platform was initially in the majority. Indeed Bukharin's faction outlined a programme which castigated Lenin for undermining the principles of the revolution. But such strong dissent did not lead to Bukharin's expulsion for criticising the party leadership. On the contrary, Lenin recognised the need for a reply and developed his view to show that the cause of world revolution would not be undermined by the signing of a treaty between the Soviet state and German imperialism. In other words, the question of theoretical and political clarification could not have been advanced if Lenin had been considered an infallible leader above criticism and to be supported without question. Instead the question of the mediation between the consciousness of the subject and objective reality was expressed by the contrast and interaction between different views and perspectives. The approach enabled the party to enrich the understanding of objective material reality by a dialectical process of cognition that involved the struggle between opposites in order to arrive at a new synthesis and development of knowledge.

Paying the price of opportunism

In contrast, the SWP has always rejected the relation of knowledge to the dialectical unity and conflict of opposites. Instead they try to uphold a monolithic unity that represses contradiction. But contradiction is not a “bad thing”. It expresses both the unity and conflicts inherent not only within the thing under study but between the whole and the part, the universal and the particular. Marxists engaged in revolutionary practice are concerned with the transitions within processes which are the key, as Lenin put in his Philosophical Notebooks, to understanding leaps or qualitative changes in the material, external world.

By idealistically abolishing contradiction, all that is expressed are the “infallible” views of the wise and omnipotent leader and central committee. Any “political” differences are to be diplomatically resolved within the central committee, and the rank and file are not to be consulted about the discussions held within the higher levels of the party. So rather than a process of political clarification based upon consultation of the whole party, the central committee is defined as the part that always represents the whole. Hence the party leadership acts as the theoretical head of the SWP, while the rank and file act in a distinct manner as the activists. The ultimate political logic of this rigid and atomistic differentiation and abstract universality is that the SWP leadership, primarily John Rees, conduct negotiations about the formation of the Peace and Justice Party while the rank and file have no real knowledge of what is taking place.

Despite the historical evidence about Boshevism, Marqusee - who has his own political agenda - insists on linking the SWP’s “contemptuous attitude towards democracy” and their view of themselves as the exclusive vanguard that “alone offer the movement proper leadership” to Leninism. In reality, however, what Marqusee portrays as the alleged Leninism of the SWP actually resembles more the emerging monolithic Stalinism of the mid-1920s.

For what is described by Marqusee are the rigid and elitist organisational principles that uphold bureaucraticism while masquerading as Leninism. These organisational and elitist premises allow the SWP to deny the importance of political principles. The significance of politics is subordinated to the imperatives of organisation rather than the role of organisation being a secondary aspect of politics.

What is absent and problematical about Marqusee’s analysis is that while he is able to describe some of the traits of the SWP he is unable to explain their causes. Thus he argues that the SWP is an organisation where “a premium is placed on having the answers and exercising leadership” and “truth is reified in the form of jargon”. These features might describe the SWP quite well, but we are no nearer to explaining the source of this approach. Indeed, if carried to a logical conclusion, Marqusee could be reacting one-sidedly to the authoritarianism and dogma of the SWP by considering that leadership is itself inherently problematic, and that the search for truth is not possible. Thus within Marqusee’s critique is an accommodation to a standpoint that not only equates the SWP with Leninism, but also rejects important aspects of what constitutes principled politics.

For the important point to be made is that the “leadership” of the SWP has shown itself to be bureaucratic within the STWC and the Socialist Alliance because it is opportunist, and so has to defend itself in rigid organisational terms. If the SWP was principled it would be more able to defend its views and practices in the context of open discussion, and this process would encourage the political clarification of its membership. Instead the SWP has to defend its opportunism through bureaucratic manoeuvres that attempt to deflect by organisational methods the necessity of discussion of its political practice. In contrast to this exercise of opportunist leadership, the emergence of real revolutionary leadership would be an emancipatory process because it would be based upon the development of consciousness and the enrichment of political practice. All involved in the movement would become a potential Lenin or Luxemburg, rather than a passive voter and supporter of the latest party line.

Thus the question of power would not be reduced to the opportunist needs of a party elite. Rather the importance of power would become a logical expression of the dynamic of the mass movement. In this context, the role of the party would be to provide real political leadership and clarity of what the mass movement was itself making possible, rather than trying to restrict and limit the movement to the convenient and bureaucratic requirements of a party elite. Hence far from acting like Bolsheviks, the SWP are instead trying to limit the potential of the mass movement created by the anti-war protests in a manner reminiscent of the Mensheviks of 1917, who condemned the Bolsheviks for wanting to transform the bourgeois-democratic revolution of February into the socialist revolution.

Obviously the present situation is not the same as that of 1917. But the point is that the dogmatic politics and bureaucraticism of the SWP is a real impediment to the possibility of creating a challenge to New Labour and the transnational corporations. The point is why does the SWP leadership consider it necessary to control and limit such actions? Marqusee cannot explain why and instead comes up with what is a substitute for an answer when he refers to the “competitive dynamic” of the SWP, which is aligned to “undemocratic” Leninism. However, the real reason for this apparently obsessive attempt to ensure organisational control is because the SWP reduce politics to the attempt to develop influential allies and put pressure on governments. The means to achieve this end are considered in the most unprincipled manner, because politics is itself emptied of its

Paying the price of opportunism

revolutionary character. Virtually any organisational method becomes possible if it facilitates the realisation of these opportunist ends. Thus the SWP was quite happy to cultivate gullible allies in relation to building the Socialist Alliance. Now that the Socialist Alliance is becoming an embarrassment for the SWP, it is prepared to carry out a purge of its former allies. The illusions of Marqusee, and others who joined the SWP version of the Socialist Alliance, are being challenged by the recent actions of the SWP in the context of the changed political situation. The anti-war movement was a high point of protest and it did not succeed because New Labour is not a reform-minded government but a champion of the free market economy acting on behalf of the global corporations. The SWP does not want to recognise this reality but in the end reality, as always, proves more decisive. Panic-like reactions by the SWP in turn have proved too much for their erstwhile fellow travellers.

1 For an extended analysis see Phil Sharpe, *Leadership in the anti-war movement*, *Socialist Future Review*, Summer 2003

2 Mike Marqusee, *Formations for the Next Left*, <http://www.signofthetimes.org.uk/>

3 See also Phil Sharpe's evaluation of Tony Cliff's autobiography, http://www.socialistfuture.org.uk/msf/ideas_and_philosophy/cliff.htm

Partisanship and the truth

Phil Sharpe examines what lies behind the moves by the Socialist Workers Party to form a Peace and Justice Party with representatives of the Muslim community. In the second of a four-part series, he examines the background to mounting criticism of the SWP's methods and its growing internal crisis.

The question of truth raised by Mike Marqusee in his open letter⁴ also needs to be addressed. Marqusee's equation of SWP dogma with the "reifying" of the truth could suggest that the search for truth itself is inherently dogmatic. If this is what he is hinting at then Marqusee would seem to be denying the possibility for truth to have an objective content outside of the "ideology" of a person's individual experience. Thus the truth becomes entirely subjective, essentially relative and a question of opinion that has no firm basis within the material world and the interaction between nature and humanity.

But what the SWP is distorting is not the truth itself, but rather their conception of what is true. Their view is a pragmatic one in that truth is what works for the party in relation to its immediate needs and interests, based on its own experiences. This alienated, subjective and limited standpoint actually denies the objectivity of actual truth. So the SWP can recognise the empirical and limited character of truth in terms of being an expression of the accomplished fact, such as the actuality of the Blair government. But their subjective, non-Marxist philosophy does not allow them to understand or acknowledge the deeper, dialectical reality of the relationship of New Labour to the process of globalisation and the domination of the transnationals within the world economy. To do so would, of course, lead to political practices designed to encourage a struggle to overthrow New Labour.

Thus it is the opportunist character of the SWP which produces a limited and narrow conception of the truth. "Truth" in their hands becomes the instrument and mechanism of the empirical needs of the party in terms of its organisational influence. The importance of developing dialectical truths that are related to an understanding of the contradictions of objective reality is effectively denied. Their philosophical standpoint is based upon the primacy of empirical facts and the surface impressions that are related to these facts. This is an entirely bourgeois philosophical method and has more in common with the ideological outlook of New Labour and its wishful thinking than serious revolutionary politics.

This is precisely why the SWP attempts to deny the significance of the material and objective reality of globalisation, and instead tries to uphold a nostalgic and reformist call for pressure politics and modifying the policies of nation states.⁵ For globalisation is an inconvenient fact in relation to their perspective of trying to put pressure on New Labour. In contrast, a revolutionary standpoint recognises that the objective content of globalisation enhances the possibility for the revolutionary transformation of society. On this basis the perspective of the overthrow of New Labour is both necessary and possible. Such a standpoint would, however, alienate the SWP from the Labour left allies it is trying to cultivate.

Conceiving the truth in terms of the pragmatic requirements of the party made it possible for the SWP to find ideological consolation in the apparent progress of their influence within the STWC. In this manner the SWP could, for a period, portray its practical success as a truth which transcended whatever could be said by critics of their opportunist politics. But the very objectivity and profound character of the truth existing independently of what they thought undermined this conclusion almost before it had been reached. What seemed an apparent practical success has turned into its opposite and the real objective content of the situation now expresses itself in terms of a crisis for the elitist party regime. For the very opportunism of the SWP within the STWC has only intensified its marginalisation from important political developments. Furthermore, the SWP has not made the expected numerical gains, its most important criteria of success, and so the hollow triumph has become a party crisis. The result has been desperate bureaucratic manoeuvres in order to try and organisationally transcend this crisis. These can only make the crisis worse, because "practical" measures are proposed as an alternative to theoretical reflection on this crisis. The only possible alternative to the process of crisis of the SWP is for a real development of revolutionary Marxism, rather than the anti-Leninist pragmatism proposed by Marqusee.

Marqusee tries to connect the undemocratic and authoritarian political practices of the SWP with what he describes as a Leninist partisanship. He outlines this point in the following terms: "Finally, what has disturbed me most in working with the SWP has been their flagrant ethical relativism. This is an ancient foible of the left, a conviction that the class struggle, or the building of a revolutionary party, or the sheer evil of the forces we find ourselves up against justifies any behaviour, no matter how dishonest, duplicitous, or destructive to others."

One possible interpretation of this comment is that the very commitment to the class standpoint of the working class in Marxist terms is what represents the basis for unprincipled, bureaucratic and undemocratic political behaviour. Consequently, there is a connection between a nihilistic rejection of any firm ethical principles and the standpoint of "anything goes" which is allegedly permissible in relation to the requirements of the class

struggle. In saying this, Marqusee is providing another argument that connects the approach and actions of the SWP with Leninism. He seems to suggest that Leninism has to be rejected if a principled and ethical standpoint is to be developed in relation to the requirements of political practice.

But why does he stop at the SWP and Leninism? Could it also not be argued that the very revolutionary character of Marxism is premised on the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society by the political action of the working class? This would suggest that Marxism too was based upon a narrow ethical relativist standpoint of what constituted the interests of the working class, and so was also unacceptable. Marqusee's stance is reminiscent of the rejection of Marxism by Bernstein, one of the leaders of German Social Democracy in the 19th century. He essentially argued that in order to defend an ethical and moral basis for socialism it was necessary to reject the dialectical and revolutionary character of Marxism. Bernstein's choice of nihilism and revolutionary Marxism or ethical socialism seems to be upheld by Marqusee. He presents us with the contemporary choice of the hegemony of the nihilism of the SWP and its alleged Leninism or some new version of ethical socialism. This is a false choice, as we will explain.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that the validity of Marxism, and its Leninist elaboration, is not primarily because of the coherence and cogency of the texts they produced. The significance is that these texts explained important aspects of objective and material reality. Thus Marx outlined why the capital-labour relation is a most important aspect of the contemporary content of the interaction between nature and humanity. Lenin and others, such as Hilferding, Luxemburg and Bukharin, showed why capitalism was intimately connected to the development of imperialism. Thus, even if it can be shown, as various reactionary cynics try to, that Marx and Lenin were nothing more than unprincipled nihilists only interested in advancing their own political prestige, the objective and material content of the capital-labour relation, and the historical necessity for the revolutionary transformation of society, would still remain.

This is an important point to make, because Marqusee does not start from the material reality of the significance of the capital-labour relation, but rather from the unethical and unprincipled practice of the SWP. It is on this basis that he effectively rejects the revolutionary validity of Marxism and Leninism. But the objective truth of the situation is that regardless of the character of the political role of the SWP, the exploitative and alienating content of the capital-labour relation requires a revolutionary process of transformation to overcome these limitations of capitalism.

Secondly, Lenin makes the point in "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism"⁶ that the partisan standpoint of the working class is not a pretext for reducing what constitutes truth to narrow relativist criteria, such as opinion, popularity, and what is immediately apparent. On the contrary, the approach of a partisan class viewpoint is a recognition that it is necessary to establish objective truth, even if this objective truth is uncomfortable and not in accordance with what seems to be most useful and successful in relation to political practice. In 1914, the majority of the Second International decided to support national imperialist regimes in the world war. Lenin recognised that it was necessary to explain the objective basis of this degeneration in relation to the imperialist epoch of capitalism and the development of a labour aristocracy.

He concluded that it was not possible to reclaim the parties of the Second International for Marxism, even if that was the aspiration within the most advanced sections of the working class. For Lenin, the requirement of outlining an objective truth about material reality was what accorded with the revolutionary interests of the working class, even if this view was rejected by most workers at the time. If, instead he had adopted the standpoint of "anything goes", and reduced principles to issues of utility, he would surely have tried to establish a standpoint that reconciled the role of revolutionary Marxism with that of opportunist social democracy. But such a dilution of revolutionary principles would have been to Lenin to undermine objective truth because the resulting practice was in conflict with the partisan class interests of the working class.

In contrast, to the connection made by Lenin between partisanship and objective truth, the SWP tries to accommodate to existing reformist illusions about what is necessary in order to bring about social progress. Consequently, their starting point is not the objective and material truth of globalisation, and the importance this has for understanding political practice. Instead the significance of globalisation is minimised, and New Labour is conceived not as a political representation of the needs of global capital, but instead as a bourgeois workers party of the reformist era of the welfare state.⁷ On this opportunist basis, the SWP tries to develop support and influence for the politics of putting pressure on New Labour. This type of politics has a certain popularity because instead of challenging the illusions of existing and spontaneous consciousness they adapt to existing illusions in order to build up their organisational influence.

Consequently, it is this opportunism that encourages the ethical relativism of "anything goes", because political principles and the search for objective truth do not define the essentials of political activity. What is important is the attempt to recruit on the most minimal basis, and using the most pragmatic methods to achieve this end. This means the most diverse, impressionistic, and illogical methods can be used to realise these narrow ends. Thus the tendency towards ethical relativism by the SWP is not an expression of revolutionary political partisanship.

The importance of principled partisanship is in practice rejected in favour of attempts to enhance popularity and influence. On this basis, the striving for objective truth is undermined by these forms of subjective criteria that do not facilitate the process of theoretical clarity and the striving for principled political practice.

Thirdly, Trotsky outlined the classical Marxist view on the role of ethics in the work “Their Morals and Ours”⁸. Trotsky was replying to the progressive pragmatic philosopher John Dewey, who had also argued that the class conceptions of Marxism encouraged an ethical nihilism and relativism. Trotsky showed that whilst an aspect of relativism cannot be avoided, what may seem to be truth to the bourgeoisie and proletariat will be understood differently in accordance with their particular class locations. Furthermore, the requirements of the class struggle do not mean that truth is reduced to an expediency that is of little value and significance. Rather the relative value of truth has an objective content, in that whilst lying to the bourgeoisie may be politically necessary it is not ethically and politically principled for Marxists to lie to the working class. In other words, a process of systematic lying about the objective situation cannot facilitate the development of class consciousness within the working class. In fact, lying has a real objective effect of limiting the capacity of the working class to transform society in revolutionary terms. The Stalinist lies that totalitarianism and increased misery for workers and peasants constituted socialism in this way undermined objectively the historical necessity for the workers to build real socialism.

The point being made by Trotsky is that Marxism tries to uphold the highest standards of morality, ethics and truth, because this is what is required by the class struggle. In contrast, the degeneration and undermining of Marxism into a pretext for lying is because Marxism has been transformed from its revolutionary intentions into a justification of opportunist social interests. Hence, the Second International justified its accommodation to national imperialist interests in 1914 by suggesting that the struggle for socialism had been postponed until the more favourable conditions of peacetime. The struggle for socialism was never renewed by the Second International. Whilst Stalinism argued it was building socialism, objective reality showed that the Stalinist bureaucracy could never build socialism. In relation to the SWP, the “big lie” is that it is advancing the struggle for social revolution when its opportunist political practice shows a reformist adaptation to capitalism. This explains the ethical nihilism of the SWP on the question of lying. It cannot tell the truth, in terms of trying to explain the complexity of the contradictory character of reality. To do this would be to recognise the importance of a revolutionary strategy of political change. Instead it has to reduce contradictions to what are adaptable to a more evolutionary process of change, via the re-emergence of the welfare state.⁹ On this basis, we can understand the tendency towards bureaucratic deceit in the political actions of the SWP.

Obviously the tendency for the SWP towards a disdain for the truth is not of the scale and significance of Stalinism. It would be foolish to suggest a social similarity. Nevertheless, the same objective basis for lying is present, in that what is important to uphold is an ideology that formally conceives of the self-emancipation of the working class, but which in practice strives to maintain the self-importance of the party bureaucracy. In this context, anything goes in relation to discrediting authentic Marxism, reducing it instead to a caricature. Marqusee has grasped an aspect of the essence of the ethical nihilism of the SWP. But in equating this with Marxism he does not recognise that the political actions of the SWP are in practice anti-Communist when it comes to class morality as elaborated by Trotsky.

What Trotsky showed is that on the one hand Marxism is critical of the Kantian type of approach that suggests the possibility for universal moral imperatives that can be imposed onto society in a timeless manner. On the other hand this does not mean that Marxism rejects the importance of ethics and morality in relation to the requirements of class struggle and the realisation of communism. Hence the view that any means is permissible in relation to realising the primary aim and end is only true in the most formal and abstract terms. For the very aim of communism dictates that only those means that facilitate the development of the class consciousness of the working class are permissible, and so the saying that the means justify the end is actually modified by Marxism. Only those means that objectively and consistently enhance the striving for communism within the working class are necessary and principled. So particular means are not always applicable, and the changing circumstances of class struggle will indicate what means are both feasible and relevant.

Marqusee then argues that the actions of the SWP should be located within the context of an alienated society that provides the objective basis for their elitist and bureaucratic actions: “However, we should remember that all of this is a part of a much greater problem. We are all the products of the society we aim to challenge and overturn. In their hunger for status, their competitiveness, their reified perception of social realities, and their ethical relativism, the SWP mimic the dominant forces in the society they oppose.”. Once again, there is an aspect of truth in what Marqusee is outlining. The ideology of capitalist social relations is not something that can be easily and lightly overcome in the struggle against capitalism. For bourgeois ideology is more than a collection of ideas that can be effectively challenged and transcended in the process of ideological struggle. It is an expression of dominant and material social practices that are constantly generated by the alienating social relations of capital. Thus when a person becomes a revolutionary they do not automatically and mechanically

overcome the effects of bourgeois ideology. This has a material and social content and so constantly influences human activity and consciousness.

Nevertheless, it is questionable to then assume, as Marqusee seems to, that it is almost impossible to challenge the role of bourgeois ideology within capitalist society. Indeed, the very possibility that revolutionary parties can emerge based upon the theory and practice of Marxism shows that objective and material reality has a contradictory character. This facilitates the development of oppositional political tendencies that are critical of capitalism. That it has been difficult to sustain principled Marxist politics within capitalism is also an undeniable truth. This complex situation shows that alienated ideology, as an expression of the domination of bourgeois ideology, is significant in holding back the possibility of social revolution. But capitalism continues to create the material and objective possibilities for revolutionary social change. The aspiration for an alternative to capitalism is not the illusory dream of a few dogmatic Marxists. Instead the potential for the new is an expression of the historical possibility of the old, even though the development of the consciousness for this task is a complicated process and is constantly in a struggle with the alienated ideology of capitalism.

It is also questionable to suggest that the SWP are basically revolutionary, but their political practice has become dominated by this alienated ideological context. For what Marqusee describes as their competitiveness, concern for status, ethical relativism, and reified perception of reality, is connected to an opportunist political content. Marqusee is surely right to maintain that these traits are generated by capitalism, and they would influence any revolutionary party. But the difference is that a revolutionary party would attempt to challenge such traits in its political practice. Instead the SWP seems to revel in this kind of practice precisely because it is an opportunist organisation. A revolutionary party would be in constant conflict with the domination of bourgeois and alienated ideology because it is aiming to facilitate the process of the self-emancipation of the working class. In contrast, the SWP can adapt to the concepts of competitiveness and status, because it is aspiring to realise a left-wing type of adaptation to capitalism.

In contrast, Marqusee tries to show that capitalist ideology has a serious impact on revolutionary organisations, which is how he still characterises the SWP. Thus for him, the only alternative is democracy, and this must be premised by a rejection of the revolutionary standpoint of Leninism: "It is argued that the Leninist party provides this correction and discipline but the evidence - quite overwhelming at this juncture in history - is that it actually institutionalises and reifies those weaknesses and fallibilities, cocoons them from the harsh winds of social reality, and insulates them from collective scrutiny." Marqusee is only able to arrive at this conclusion not by summarising the history of Leninism, but rather by a projection of the political practice of the SWP onto Leninism. This means that he glosses over an important difference between Leninism and the SWP, in that Leninism is based upon the political principle of "going against the stream" in order to uphold the requirements of class struggle. Leninism is about challenging the domination of bourgeois ideology, such as opposing the role of reformism within the working class.

The SWP has continually accommodated to bourgeois ideology by not challenging reformism and the role of the trade union bureaucracy. This is why it has always preferred the tactic of establishing rank and file groups within the trade unions as an alternative to political struggle against the trade union bureaucracy. In this way, the SWP accepts the trade unionist conception of a division between economics and politics. This was shown most noticeably when the miners strike of 1984-85 was portrayed as a struggle over wages and jobs, and was not connected to the necessity of a general strike. Thus the SWP has been historically characterised by an adaptation to trade unionism, rather than trying to develop working class consciousness beyond the limits of trade union politics.

A real revolutionary and principled Leninism has nothing to fear from the extension of democracy, because this is an important aspect of the self-expression of the working class and the development of its political capacity to transform society. But the SWP has a dread of such a development because it fears that "events may get out of control", which means that a situation may arise whereby a more ambitious and principled leadership will develop in mass struggles. This is why the SWP was against even the most modest spontaneous gesture, such as direct action against the war on Iraq, even while it held meetings devoted to Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the US. So the SWP was vehemently opposed to plans for a sit-down in Whitehall by anti-war marchers. A real Leninist organisation would not fear the creative potential of mass struggles, but instead would recognise that leadership means trying to articulate the logic of struggle, and would strive to extend and realise the potential of these struggles. The SWP is bureaucratic, because in the last analysis it prefers a situation in which it is in control of its own little empire rather than have the risks and problems of trying to develop a leadership that is really about leading a struggle to overthrow capitalism. When the Paris Commune arose between 1870-71 Marx supported it wholeheartedly even though it had no direct Marxist influence, because he recognised that it was based upon working class political power. The approach of the SWP would be to criticise a similar Commune because it had no SWP involvement, and might even challenge the bureaucratic limitations of the SWP. This is why the SWP are not Leninist, and never will be.

4 Mike Marqusee, *Formations for the Next Left*, <http://www.signofthetimes.org.uk/>

5 For an extended analysis on this question, see Phil Sharpe's critique of Alex Callinicos's *Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* and the views of the SWP on imperialism and globalisation at http://www.socialistfuture.org.uk/msf/ideas_and_philosophy/CallinicosIntro.htm

6 Lenin, *Collected Works Volume 14*

7 Alex Callinicos, *Against the Third Way*, Polity Press 2001

8 Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*, Pathfinder Press 1972

9 This view is outlined by Callinicos in his *Anti-Capitalist Manifesto*

You can't 'cheat' reality

Phil Sharpe examines what lies behind the moves by the Socialist Workers Party to form a Peace and Justice Party with representatives of the Muslim community. In the third of a four-part series, he examines the background to mounting criticism of the SWP's methods and its growing internal crisis.

Despite the limitations in Mike Marqusee's critique of the Socialist Workers Party¹⁰ (see parts I and II), he is able to make many perceptive points about its political practice: "It is hardly new to note that blind loyalty to an organisation is a dangerous state of mind, and it saddens me that despite all the evidence of the left's past errors, the SWP by and large will not engage in critical examination of their own history or current analysis and practice. When events embarrass them, the error is buried in silence. There is a fear of looking harsh realities or awkward questions in the face and a reluctance to spend time addressing them. There seems to be an imperative to move on to the next campaign or issue or intervention without pausing to assess the success or otherwise of previous efforts. I suspect that some of the leaders fear that if the membership is not kept constantly distracted, they might begin to ask awkward questions."

What Marqusee cannot explain is the logic of the practice of the SWP. For what he has described seems to represent a recipe for the self-destruction and the demoralisation of the SWP. Marqusee's analysis has an important weakness, because by presenting the SWP as essentially irrational he is unable to indicate why it has been able to become the main political representative of the "left". It is only possible to make organisational and numerical advances up to a certain point, and then there is a process of political reckoning and the unfolding of the consequences of an essentially opportunist political practice. This point was most vividly shown in relation to the history of German Social Democracy in the early 20th century, which made many impressive organisational advances in terms of increasing electoral support and growth in party membership. Nevertheless, when the objective situation demanded a qualitative leap in both theory and practice in relation to the outbreak of imperialist war, Social Democracy was not able to respond and a process of opportunist degeneration began.

On a much smaller scale, the SWP is entering a similar situation. For much of its history, the SWP (and its predecessor the International Socialist Organisation) based its theory and practice upon the view that capitalism had entered a long period of stability in the post-war period.¹¹ Hence, the economic and political perspectives were established for the view that the class struggle was basically about wages. In these terms of accommodating to the limitations of the spontaneous consciousness of militant workers the IS/SWP was able to make numerical gains in the 1970s. The necessity to transform militant struggles into political struggles against the Tory and Labour governments of the 1970s was effectively denied by the rigid emphasis on the importance of wages. By the mid-1970s, the IS/SWP considered that militancy was starting to subside, and the downturn theory was eventually adopted. This allowed the SWP to empirically deny the necessity and possibility of developing a perspective to challenge the Tory and Labour governments of the 1970s.

The onset of the reactionary Thatcher government created the first major crisis for the SWP, because their downturn perspective was in contradiction with the need to intensify the class struggle in order to defeat the Tories. In particular, the miners' strike of 1984-85 showed that the transformation of a sectional and militant trade union action into a generalised class struggle against capital was crucial for victory. However, the SWP failed to respond to this political challenge caused by the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism, and instead persisted with their downturn theory. Hence, the only way that the SWP could try to gloss over the divergence between the requirements of the objective situation and their subjective and political limitations was to portray the miners strike as a 'heroic' trade union struggle that had little chance of victory. In these opportunist terms, the failings of the politics of the SWP could be presented as virtues and an expression of the "realism" of the situation.

Consequently, what was an important political limitation from the point of view of authentic revolutionary Marxism - the failure of the SWP to call for a general strike - was ideologically transformed into a virtue. Nevertheless, the SWP was only able to thrive in this situation because authentic revolutionary Marxism entered into a crisis in this period with the split in the Workers Revolutionary Party, which was connected to the demoralisation caused by the defeat of the miners. The WRP had been able to make important advances precisely because its perspectives were based upon what was necessary in a period of the intensification of class struggle. The crisis in the WRP meant that the SWP was able to present itself as the main expression of revolutionary politics, and so the possibility of a significant crisis in the SWP was overcome and displaced onto developments in the future.

The conditions for such a crisis only increased. For the SWP had only learnt from the miners' strike that principled revolutionary politics were not required. It seemed possible to maintain the organisational cohesion of the party apparatus by putting forward the most modest and "realistic" politics of putting pressure on the state rather than developing a strategy for its revolutionary overthrow. These ideological and idealist illusions would

become transformed into the expression of a political crisis in a situation where the SWP had the official leadership of a mass movement - the antiwar agitation - and when the necessity for a revolutionary strategy could no longer be displaced and avoided.

In the early 1990s, the SWP tried to respond ambitiously to its position of political domination within the British 'left'. The downturn theory was unceremoniously ditched, and instead the view was adopted that what was occurring was the "1930's in slow motion". The demise of Stalinism and the development of the anti-capitalist movement was presented as the context for new political opportunities that would consolidate the political hegemony of the SWP over the "left", especially as the expulsion of Militant from the Labour Party was creating a crisis for another rival organisation. In this situation, the SWP was presenting itself as the only credible and serious revolutionary organisation. The evaluation of the SWP in terms of its history was unimportant, because what was organisationally significant was its new found pre-eminence on the left. Alex Callinicos has summed up this empirical approach: "Political tendencies must be judged not primarily on their theory or their past, but on their responses to the challenges of the present."¹²

What was being suggested was that people should join the SWP in terms of its present political record, and should not therefore make connections between its past and present. For Callinicos, there is no necessary connection between past and present, because all that matters is what is happening "now", and so any "mistakes" of the past are considered to be irrelevant in relation to the carrying out of present political aims. This standpoint is most compatible with opportunism, because a principled revolutionary organisation would try to rectify past errors in order that they do not undermine the development of principled political practice in the present. However, the SWP does not have such concerns because what is important is its organisational credibility rather than the task of theoretical and political clarification. Any problems with the stance of the SWP on the miners' strike, and any other situation, can be glossed over because the issue is not whether its stance is principled and in accordance with the requirements of the potential of the objective situation. Instead what is considered important is whether the SWP was able to make numerical gains and hold its own in comparison to rivals.

The SWP theoretically rejects the importance of historical memory, and the role of the party as the collective memory of the working class. Its opportunist character means that the past can only be a matter of embarrassment rather than the basis for reflection in order to suggest means of improvement and future development. The SWP always considers that its practice is basically adequate, because the criteria of adequacy is not the relation of party and class, but instead practice is narrowly defined as what is compatible with the organisational needs of the SWP. This is why the SWP does not reflect upon past errors, and is content to quickly move to new areas of struggle without making a balance sheet of past efforts. For the opportunist content of their politics means that they do not consider themselves accountable to the working class in relation to the role of their practice. So what is important is to find new areas of struggle where awkward questions about their past role will not be asked.

The development of a situation in which the SWP had political domination over the "left" eventually became the basis for the new emergence of the crisis in the organisation. It could no longer politically define its activity in terms of the downturn theory which had justified political passivity alongside the maintenance of organisational cohesion. Instead the SWP had to show initiative and try to take responsibility for developing the "left" in a manner which would challenge its existing marginalisation. Thus the SWP became involved in political regroupment initiatives like the Socialist Alliance, whilst trying to uphold the traditional organisational principle of the cohesion of the party. To the SWP, the Socialist Alliance could never be anything else than the expression of the will of the party. If it were to establish its own autonomy the prestige of the party might be undermined. Consequently, the Socialist Alliance itself could never be anything else than an expression of the potential for crisis within the SWP. It was one particular manifestation of the contradiction between the organisational imperatives of the SWP and what was genuinely required in order to build a real and genuine united front. This, of course, requires democracy, participation and genuine freedom of criticism. The first hint of criticism would plunge the Socialist Alliance into crisis, because this would be a challenge to the organisational prestige of the SWP. This is why the Socialist Alliance has been in a state of perpetual crisis, and why the SWP has formally acted to purge the organisation and establish its total political control. Essentially Marqusee and company have participated in a charade.

Callinicos describes these 'unity' initiatives of the SWP in the following terms: "Organising on the basis of a broader and more ambiguous programmatic basis may sometimes be a necessary phase in the process of building a mass revolutionary party but a looser party is no substitute for the real thing." Thus it was necessary to make theoretical and political concessions in order to construct united fronts that were still controlled by the party. These united fronts were only to be shadows of the party itself, because what was important was to build the party, which was to remain the central organisational principle of the SWP that guided its political practice. The united front could not have any dynamism of its own because this could challenge the role of the party. Indeed, the requirements of activity meant that the party had to maintain itself as the distinctive essence and

controlling mechanism of the united front: “The relative ideological homogeneity of a revolutionary Marxist party gives it greater capacity for rapid and decisive action than looser, more programmatically ambiguous formations.”

In this way, the conception of the organisational superiority of the party in relation to the united front is the justification for the party to always try to establish its dominance over the united front, or else there is no real value in the united front. It was just about possible to organisationally sustain this conception in relation to the Anti-Nazi League and Globalise Resistance, which were effectively party fronts, and even to temporarily uphold this approach in relation to the Socialist Alliance. But it was not possible to uphold this outlook in relation to the dynamic and mass anti-war movement. The attempt to maintain organisational control over the STWC by the SWP could only be upheld by a process of further political degeneration that meant the SWP constructed a de facto alliance with the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain. The demands of organisational fetishism, and upholding the narrow prestige of the party, had led to an opportunist alliance that explicitly rejected the possibility of any revolutionary strategy and the struggle to overthrow New Labour. So the very moment of triumph for the SWP was expression of the most vivid re-emergence of the crisis of the SWP, because its organisational control of the STWC meant the complete repudiation of any conception of revolutionary leadership. The semblance of leadership in terms of organisational control meant the lack of any principled leadership and the rejection of even formal adherence to revolutionary politics. Instead, the SWP veered towards the stance of popular frontism with a reliance on bourgeois politics as the basis of getting the government to change its policies. This opportunism actually did nothing to strengthen the organisational credibility of the SWP. The manoeuvres to try and resolve this crisis, such as the proposed Peace and Justice party, have only intensified this crisis.

So, an important aspect of the development of the crisis of the SWP is that it has not been possible to reconcile its aspiration for organisational homogeneity of the various “united fronts” it is involved in with the potential for dynamic pluralism should they develop into a mass movement. This is the very problem that the SWP was confronted with in relation to the anti-war movement. The answer of the SWP was not to try and develop political leadership on the basis of facilitating the fullest expression of the potential of the anti-war movement. On the contrary, it was necessary to ensure that activities only took place with the permission of the STWC elite. This formal conception of the united front emphasised maximum organisational rigidity at the expense of the political clarity and development of initiative. In words, the SWP holds a different view of the united front. Callinicos argues that the political attitude towards the united front should be based upon ideological clarity: “Nevertheless the development of a strong Marxist pole within the movement depends on the willingness of revolutionaries to engage in ideological struggle.” In practice, it is ideological struggle which is always sacrificed in favour of the priority of organisational influence.

The SWP became famous in the STWC for not wanting to talk about politics and instead emphasising the importance of activity. On this basis of glossing over the importance of politics they hoped to grow numerically. But this opportunist stance rebounded on them because STWC supporters had no reason to join the SWP. The very rejection of the importance of ideological clarity meant that the SWP had effectively dissolved itself into the STWC, and had undermined the requirements of political struggle. The opportunist schema of the SWP to use the STWC as a launch pad for overcoming its political marginalisation was in tatters. The perspective of the SWP to recruit STWC activists into the SWP on the most minimal basis was undermined by the very opportunism of the SWP. The result was a new crisis.

The crisis of the SWP that occurred in the miners’ strike had returned in a new context because of the contradiction between its limited conception of leadership and the strategic requirements of the mass movement against the war in Iraq. The SWP does not connect its political practice to a careful analysis of what is objectively necessary in order to advance the class struggle in a principled manner. Instead the SWP subjectively considers that it is possible to “cheat” objective political requirements and instead uphold politics that are based upon the illusion that it is possible to reform capitalism in a progressive manner. The principled approach of the most intransigent opposition to a bourgeois government carrying out the imperialist war was diluted into the populist stance of protest and putting pressure on New Labour to change its policies. This opportunism is not without its effects, because it has contributed to a demoralisation and disorientation of the anti-war movement. So the effect of the SWP putting its organisational needs before the requirements of the mass movement has reawakened the crisis of the SWP, because its lack of leadership is all too apparent. The end result is a collection of opportunist manoeuvres in order to divert its membership from asking awkward questions about recent developments.

10 Mike Marqusee, *Formations for the Next Left*, <http://www.signofthetimes.org.uk/>

11 For an extended analysis see Phil Sharpe’s evaluation of Tony Cliff’s autobiography, http://www.socialistfuture.org.uk/msf/ideas_and_philosophy/cliff.htm

12 Alex Callinicos, *Regroupment, Realignment and the Revolutionary Left*, 2002

Developing a revolutionary alternative

Phil Sharpe examines what lies behind the moves by the Socialist Workers Party to form a Peace and Justice Party with representatives of the Muslim community. In the final part of a four-part series, he examines the background to mounting criticism of the SWP's methods and its growing internal crisis.

The question arises as to what alternative can be developed to overcome the political limitations of the Socialist Workers Party and *really* challenge New Labour. For the point is that any critique of the SWP can only develop practical aspects if it is able to outline an alternative that is both more principled and able to consistently facilitate the development of revolutionary consciousness. The SWP has been able to maintain its hegemony over the "left" because it has not faced a coherent challenge to its opportunist politics. What has taken place is a process of adaptation to the politics and practice of the SWP. This process of absorption until recently included people like Mike Marqusee, which is why his critique of the SWP is important and welcome, despite its limitations. However, the important problem remains of trying to establish the theory and principles that can both effectively challenge the role of the SWP and outline what could constitute the beginning of a revolutionary alternative.

Mike Marqusee contends that an important starting point for any principled political movement should represent an alternative to New Labour: "Our movement and our institutions and any parties we form should define themselves against the managerialist social vision and political/economic practices of New Labour and not only of new Labour, but of the governing assumptions and methods of this phase of capitalist development (of which New Labour is the parochial expression)."¹³

This comment seems to be a promising starting point, in that New Labour is identified as the most reactionary antagonist with regards to the question of the realisation of the aims and principles of any potential movement for social and political emancipation. In this context, Marqusee goes beyond the limitations of the SWP, who in theory are opposed to New Labour, but in practice do not demand it is removed from office. However, it is still important to make this opposition to New Labour more precise and concrete. For it is one thing to say that we are against New Labour, but what does this actually mean? Is Marqusee suggesting that opposition to New Labour is still confined to making protests and putting pressure on the government to change its policies in the manner of the SWP? Or is he suggesting something more principled in terms of trying to develop a strategic alternative through the struggle to overthrow New Labour and replace it with democratic and participatory economic and political structures? He does not make his observations about New Labour concrete.

The ambiguities of Marqusee's stance on New Labour mean that he has not actually clearly differentiated himself from the opportunist limitations of the politics of the SWP. For he is still not clear about what opposition to New Labour means, and consequently his view could accommodate the SWP's approach towards New Labour. The SWP also have a disdain for New Labour at the level of propaganda, but the need to develop an effective challenge and alternative to the political rule of New Labour is not represented by their political practice. The SWP reject the strategic necessity to connect immediate political practice with the campaign to overthrow New Labour and replace it with a revolutionary alternative. In order to complete a process of transition from challenging the limitations of the SWP to developing a revolutionary alternative it would be vitally important for Marqusee to make a clear and unambiguous call for the overthrow of New Labour. On this basis he would be more emphatically differentiated from the opportunist politics of the SWP.

The utilisation of the term "phase of capitalist development" is also problematical. Is Marqusee suggesting that capitalism is still similar to the imperialist epoch of the 20th century, or is the role of imperialism connected to the onset of globalised capital? This theoretical question has important strategic implications. The SWP uses Lenin's theory of imperialism in order to argue that capitalism is still organised around the nation state in order to justify their view that it is possible to pressurise the state to change its policies and return to being a welfare state. If Marqusee is suggesting that New Labour are the political representatives of global capital, then the importance of revolutionary strategy and the necessity to overthrow New Labour is shown to be an objective expression of actual material and social developments. Marqusee's reference to a phase of capitalist development is actually a timeless and abstract phrase that seems to have very uncertain strategic implications. This could represent another indication that he has not yet consistently differentiated himself from the opportunist theory and practice of the SWP.

Marqusee's experience with the SWP seems to have also caused him to be against the role of a revolutionary party. His offhand reference to "any parties we form" suggests that parties are possibly not essential in relation to the question of the realisation of the tasks of challenging and overthrowing capitalism. He is implying that the very character of parties are bureaucratic and so are basically a hindrance in relation to the spontaneous dynamic of the development of mass movements. So his call for a "vehicle of democratic participation" that is based upon internal democracy and is accountable, and able to "minimise bureaucratic quagmires and factional

competition”, and can offer “room for doubt and agnosticism and revision”, could suggest that the realisation of democracy is counterposed to the role of a party. The role of a mass movement is apparently considered to be the most likely basis for democracy to flourish.

However, even the most recent experience of mass struggles show that an anti-party culture does not guarantee the realisation of democracy. On the contrary, the democratic impulses of the anti-capitalist and anti-war movement have been contradicted by the role of often self-appointed elites. They have often used the prejudices of an anti-party culture to impose their will on a mass movement. The spokespersons for the anti-capitalists and anti-war movements have often been unelected people who acquired unaccountable organisational and ideological influence. The very opportunism of the SWP was that it acted to ensure that this division between the politically-unorganised spontaneity of the mass movement and the bureaucratic dictate of an elite was consolidated rather than overcome. This is precisely why they have resisted any attempt to try and make the Peoples Assembly structure more accountable, democratic, and a means of expressing the aspirations of the mass movement.

But how is this unsatisfactory situation overcome? It is not by the rejection of the role of party political organisation, because this situation only reinforces the possibility of imposing the will of a bureaucratic elite. Instead the flourishing of a party political culture will enable the participants in the mass movement to test which are the most genuinely democratic and express the political requirements of the mass movement.

This point can also be made in relation to the still fairly recent revolutionary experience of France in 1968 and in Portugal in 1974. In both situations, the development of a mass upheaval led to the flowering of mass political discussion about the way forward for society. However, the continued hegemony of the role of the Communist Party of France and the Socialist and Communist Parties in Portugal meant that the political initiative remained with parties that were against revolutionary change. Also, in relation to Portugal, there was also the illusion that the radicalised Armed Forces Movement could lead the struggle for social change rather than the working class. Hence the massive democratic potential of the mass movement was not realised because a credible revolutionary party did not emerge that could connect the dynamism of the mass movement to a strategy for the overthrow of capitalism. This dilemma is not a question of historical experience, but is an expression of all those developments where a mass movement emerges without conscious direction and is still politically limited by its very dynamic spontaneity. Such a problem was particularly acute in France and Portugal because there was a increasing mass mood for historical change, but this aspiration could not find a viable party political expression and so the opportunity for revolution was not realised.

In relation to the contemporary mass anti-war movements, the political context is not that of a revolutionary situation. But the development of a principled revolutionary party is crucial in order to enhance the democratic possibilities of the mass movement. For such a party would not fear the potential of the mass movement, and therefore seek bureaucratic control by organisational measures. It would instead encourage the development of participatory structures that would try to realise the democratic and dynamic potential of the mass movement. For the alternative is not that the mass movement will resolve these political questions spontaneously, even when democratic organisations have been spontaneously formed. The question is what type of leadership will emerge and what will be its approach towards the significance of democracy?

Opportunism often glorifies spontaneity because the lack of conscious political direction is amenable to the organisational control of a bureaucratic elite. This is precisely why the SWP have often tried to downplay their party political role and uphold their positions as representatives of the STWC. This is connected to a glorification of spontaneity and the promotion of distrust about the role of party politics, except in the activist and “neutral” role of the SWP’s control of the STWC. So the struggle to realise the democratic potential of the mass movement is the struggle to realise revolutionary leadership.

Marqusee describes the attributes of the political formation that he is aspiring for and comments that it: “looks on working class and dispossessed people of all kinds as a resource of ideas and activity, not merely as voting and demo fodder”. This is a very important point about what could differentiate principled politics from the opportunism of the SWP. For the approach of the SWP is essentially that the mass movement should be an expression of the bureaucratic dictates of the party organisation, rather than the party being the conscious expression of the dynamism of the mass movement. Thus the principled role of the party is that it considers the spontaneity, diversity and complexity of the mass movement as the basis to develop its politics. Consequently, the dynamism of the mass movement enriches the objective ability of the party to provide leadership in a manner that develops the possibilities that are emerging out of the mass movement.

In contrast, the standpoint of the SWP starts with what it considers to be the self-limitations of the mass movement. This is why the self-initiative of the mass movement is discouraged, because such autonomous action is considered as potentially going beyond these self-imposed limitations. Hence the concept of “correct” action becomes reduced to what has been bureaucratically dictated by the party, and is a classical expression of “demo fodder”. However, Marqusee’s generally distrustful attitude towards the role of the party means that

there are problems about how an alternative to the SWP's bureaucratic approach is to be developed. The significance of politics is what is primarily absent in Marqusee's analysis, because he does not ask what are the politics that will enable the mass movement to develop a dynamism and potential that goes beyond the type of bureaucratic limits that the SWP would impose. Only the development of a strategy can provide a concrete and objective content to the question of how to both enhance and realise the self-initiative and potential of the mass movement.

Instead of providing his own version of strategy that could challenge the bureaucratic limitations the SWP imposed on the anti-war movement, Marqusee provides a collection of platitudes about the movement needing to be "populist but not opportunist", and "militant and uncompromising but also patient and realistic". These comments may represent admirable virtues, but we are no nearer to knowing what are the type of politics that express the principled strategic and political alternative to the bureaucratic and opportunist practice of the SWP. Instead he is outlining a collection of ethical requirements for principled political practice, but not indicating what represents the necessary politics that can uphold these socialist ethics.

The absence of a political strategy in Marqusee's approach means that despite the ethical validity of his comments about the SWP they will still seem to be politically credible because they at least still offer some sort of strategy as a guide to political practice. Indeed, Marqusee has outlined no substantive analysis - despite some fruitful suggestions - as to what is precisely lacking in the strategy of the SWP. Indeed, his initial differentiation between the programme and method of the SWP means that it is still plausible to conclude that he possibly has no major strategic differences with them. The only way that this issue could be clarified would be for him to develop his political critique of the SWP. Indeed, unless he does develop some sort of political analysis then all that he is presenting is an ethical critique of the SWP that cannot constructively suggest what could represent the necessary political alternative to the SWP. This will mean that the SWP will be able to suggest that the standpoint of Marqusee represents sour grapes rather than a consistently serious attempt to engage with them theoretically and practically.

Indeed the absence of any consistent strategy in Marqusee's approach could mean that in the last analysis his criticism of the SWP expresses an accommodation to reformism because of the failure to uphold principled revolutionary politics. In this context, he talks about a political formation being "serious about the specifics of feasible reform (and the use of whatever powers can be wielded through the local or national state)". Such a comment is unfortunate given that he is obviously committed to a social alternative to capitalism. The point is that he does not establish what are the significance of reforms within the context of class struggle. It is one thing to argue that the winning of reforms by mass activity may encourage the development of class consciousness and so strengthen the struggle for socialism. But it is another thing to give emphasis to the importance of reforms to the extent that the revolutionary transformation of society becomes a secondary question. Marqusee's formulation does not resolve these strategic dilemmas and instead it could be deemed to be more "realistic" and "practical" to emphasise the importance of reforms.

What is possibly most praiseworthy in his analysis is his adherence to a "vision of social transformation", which "recognises that this vision in the end must transcend or overthrow capitalism but also acknowledges that none of the socialist blueprints offered so far are adequate and that the new society must emerge through extended debate and experiment". This comment shows that Marqusee has recognised one of the most important aspects of the dynamic of the contemporary mass movements, which is that they have not just been about opposing the actions of the ruling class but they also represent the aspiration to construct a social and emancipatory alternative to capitalism. In this context, Marqusee's own conception of a new vision of the future can become an indispensable part of the necessary discussion - to which he is also committed - about what should replace global capitalism. His comment only goes to show that the utopian aspiration for a historical alternative to capitalism is generated by the objective and material development of globalisation itself, and by the mass struggles that have been the result of these new social processes. However, Marqusee's glossing over of the importance of strategy also shows that it is not sufficient to aspire to realise a historical alternative to capitalism. It is also necessary to develop a political strategy that can facilitate the tasks of realising these visions of the future.

13 Mike Marqusee, *Formations for the Next Left*, www.signsofthetimes.org.uk

For information about the **Movement for a Socialist Future** write to:

MSF PO Box 942 London SW1V 2AR e-mail msf@socialistfuture.org.uk

or visit the website at www.socialistfuture.org.uk