

# Vermeer – light years ahead

**A CLUSTER OF SMALL PAINTINGS FROM 17th CENTURY HOLLAND IS PULLING IN RECORD CROWDS AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY IN LONDON, WITH VISITORS EVEN CROSSING THE ATLANTIC FROM AMERICA HAVING FAILED TO GET IN TO THE FIRST SHOWING IN NEW YORK. REVIEWED BY CORINNA LOTZ**

JUST OVER FIVE YEARS AGO, a Vermeer exhibition, including many of the same works as this one, drew huge numbers to the Mauritius Gallery in the Hague and then to Washington. Why does Vermeer hold this unusual fascination for today's art lovers?

In their own day, as the National Gallery's director, Neil MacGregor, has noted, it was Rembrandt's pupil, Carel Fabritius, who was considered the greatest of the constellation of painters working in Delft.

"Then for 200 years, de Hooch was the big star; in the whole 20th century, it was Vermeer," MacGregor says. And now, it seems the 21st century will follow suit in its admiration for the short-lived artist of whom only 35 paintings survive.

The French critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger first focused international attention on the artist in 1866. He researched collections in Germany, Belgium and Austria. With Berlin museum director Gustav Waagen, he identified Vermeer's hand in a number of key paintings.

The individual qualities of the artist could begin to be appreciated by more than a handful of connoisseurs as some of his works entered public collections in the last years of the 19th century. The new Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, one of the great paintings in the current show, in 1899.

Eventually, the first solo exhibition for Vermeer was held in Rotterdam in 1935, and his reputation has grown ever since. Thus, it is a



combination of the detective efforts of critics, art historians and curators that has brought the identity of the artist to the fore.

In addition, the rise of a new way of viewing nature and changes in artistic style, which also marked the second half of the 19th century, were instrumental in enhancing an understanding the 17th century painter of Delft. Manet and the Impressionists shared Vermeer's freshness, the feeling of well being and confidence, his

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Opposite page *The Art of Painting*  
c.1666-68 and left *Girl with a Red Hat*  
1665-7 by Vermeer

elevation of daily life to high art. They took forward the observation of light effects with deft touches of coloured pigments.

There is a further connection between the Delft school and the 19th century advances in showing what was described as “nature’s pencil” – the way light “creates” the visual world. The Impressionists worked under the influence of early photography, just as the Delft school employed devices using optical lenses, like the camera obscura.

And so, today we see the artist’s jewel-like canvases, through eyes “schooled” by the colour and light of the Impressionists. We can appreciate their vibrancy, their reproduction of light at a time when high quality colour images, reproduced by laser scanners and digital technology bombard us every day through the media. But there is an added dimension here. He is not only a master of enchanting – almost hypnotic – plays of light and colour. What we see in Vermeer’s 13 canvases at the National Gallery are not simply “impressions”.

Like the Impressionists, Vermeer captures the immediate. But he also evokes the mediated – the bright and diffuse fall of light on the body and surrounding objects in space, on the surface and into depth and the subtlest of transitions.

Vermeer’s personal style is inseparable from

the social, scientific and political revolution of his time. It can be understood as a visual expression of a new philosophy, a new understanding of the material world. In addition, he studied and absorbed the innovations of southern Baroque artists like Caravaggio. Painters in the Protestant countries learnt a great deal from the art of the Counter Reformation in Italy.

At the National Gallery we can see Vermeer’s evolution from 1653, when he was 21, to 1670-1672, a few years before his untimely death at the age of 43. Three major early works are an eye-opener, so different are they from what to many seems Vermeer’s “usual” style. They seem closer to Poussin, Caravaggio and the Italian Baroque than any Dutch artist.

*Diana and her Companions* and *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* show large figures, bathed in a golden light. One is religious, the other mythological. Contrasting themes, but both depict women engaged in contemplation. Sweeps of bold colour and composition combine with telling gestures to involve the viewer in the mood of the protagonists. In *Diana and her Companions*, the goddess of the hunt has her feet sponged by an attendant. Each of the five women, their faces in shadowy profile, seems absorbed in thought.

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By 1658 Vermeer drops all references to religion and mythology. Within short three years, we move from the classical to the contemporary, from sacred to the profane. We are now firmly in the present. Instead of a literary reference, we witness a nodal moment in the life of a living person. *The Procuress* is set in a brothel. It is the moment when money changes hands. The client holds a gold coin above a smiling prostitute's hand, the brothel keeper looks on. The only intimation of mortality is the ambiguous leer and dark "chador" of the procuress. The man on the left, possibly a self portrait, looks out at us, involving us in the event.

Unlike his contemporaries, Vermeer minimises the sordid aspect of the transaction. A sense of mystery and contemplation, however, persist. Now they are embodied in images of contemporary life.

Vermeer was not the first to draw his subject matter from the life of ordinary people. Countless "genre" scenes of peasants or the middle classes, "merry companies" populate Dutch paintings from the time of Breughel in the 16th century.

The Dutch school pioneered scenes of low life, and later the domestic life of the middle classes in contrast to most of their counterparts in the Roman Catholic countries of Italy and Spain. Painters such as Ostade, Steen, Metsu, Ter Borch and de Hooch took peasant life, tavern scenes and drinking parties as their subjects.

But instead of showing groups of people, Vermeer zooms in on the complex connection between an individual and another. Sometimes he shows two people in a relationship.

He presents them engaged in intellectual, artistic or domestic labour, or courtship in iconic images. He encourages mediation on the emotions and thoughts of the men and women of his time.

Often he singles out a woman caught in a moment of action, set in a carefully delineated space. Pouring milk, playing a musical instrument, opening a letter acquire an astonishing intensity. His women are endowed with a richness of significance hitherto attached to goddesses or saints. Vermeer combines the here and now with an element of infinite mystery probably unprecedented in the history of art.

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Opposite page *The Procuress*  
1656 and left *The Milkmaid*  
1657-8 by Vermeer

*The Milkmaid*, one of the most popular paintings of all time, is exceptional even within Vermeer's own work by showing an ordinary servant woman alone at work rather than a lady of leisure. She, above all, symbolises a cultural revolution – what the poet Baudelaire two centuries later called “the heroism of modern life”.

We are presented with the mysticism of the ordinary, finding exquisite beauty in one person, one action and a few objects made by skilled craftspeople. A loaf of bread, an earthenware bowl, a woven basket, a luxurious carpet, a map caught in a silvery light. As H.W. Janson wrote in his *History of Art*: “We feel as if a veil had been pulled from our eyes; the everyday world shines with a jewel-like freshness.”

The milkmaid stands by herself, set into depth, with space flowing around her. The kitchen table is crowded with a basket of bread and crockery on the left; light from the window is balanced by the bare wall and tiled floor to the right.

The strong yellow of her bodice with its red stitching is heightened by the blue apron and upturned blue and green sleeves. The primary

colours then sink into shadows which form a curved silhouette against the illuminated wall.

There is a simultaneous process of reduction and then re-synthesis whereby every object and colour is brought into play with every other. Each form, each touch of the brush plays its part, like an actor in a play. Vermeer focuses the eye on a few essentials, each concentrating thought and emotion. The intellectual stimulus seems to emanate from within the figure and her relationship to her surroundings rather than being artificially imposed by the artist.

It is a suspension in time when things are at a juncture: the milk flows from the jug. Is it about to run out? Who is it for? What lies beyond the window? We are invited to take part as privileged spectators in an intimate moment. Vermeer captures transitions, when things are in balance in the relationship of people and things. More questions than answers arouse the imagination.

Through his work, which is now nearly 350 years old, a 21st century person can explore the mysteries of human existence and study on the canvas itself a revolutionary moment in time.

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In the ecstatic critical reaction to these works, the intellectual driving force has tended to remain hidden. We need to place Vermeer in the context, not simply of the diarists of the day, but the major ideological currents sweeping Europe in the 17th century.

Dutch painting celebrated the rise of a new class in history which was based on Protestantism. The burgher merchants waged war on the rule of Catholic Spain, which until 1574 controlled the Netherlands. In 1648, Spain was forced to recognise the United Netherlands at the Treaty of Munster.

The 1640s and 1650s – Vermeer’s formative years – were a convulsive revolutionary period, both in the Netherlands and across the Channel in England. In 1649, after seven years of civil war, Charles I was beheaded and England became a republic under the rule of Oliver Cromwell.

Protestantism challenged feudal religious and political dogmas while discoveries in science and technology and new philosophical outlooks transformed the way people understood the world. In England, Francis Bacon put forward a materialist view which saw matter in motion and as a combination of particles and nature as a combination of bodies endowed with manifold properties. In this early materialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels later wrote, “matter smiles at human beings, as a whole with poetical sensuous brightness”.

A new spirit of scientific discovery prevailed in the Netherlands as in England. Advances in

astronomy assisted navigation to distant shores. Scientists and skilled craftspeople, especially painters used lenses to study and reproduce space throughout centres of artistic activity like Amsterdam and Delft.

Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, a fellow citizen of Delft, and the executor of Vermeer’s will, devised double-convex lenses held in position by brass plates – the first microscopes. With his instruments van Leeuwenhoek discovered the microstructures of biological life such as red corpuscles, protozoa and bacteria. Meanwhile in Amsterdam, Benedict de Spinoza was one of the illustrious group of philosophers of the day, who were mathematicians and scientists as well – men such as Leibniz, Hobbes and Descartes. Spinoza was born in the same year as Vermeer and outlived him by only two. He was well versed in science and mathematics, believing that the latter was the means to discovering the truth about the universe.

Spinoza was immersed in science and mathematics, believing that the latter was the means to discovering the truth about the universe. The most shocking aspect of his thought for his contemporaries was the philosopher’s identification of God with the physical universe. Spinoza’s search for truth involved a concept of substance as that which exists in itself and does not depend on anything external for its existence.

We do not know if Spinoza’s ideas were discussed in Delft. What we do know is that van Leeuwenhoek, who almost certainly knew

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Opposite:  
*The Goldfinch*  
1654 by Fabritius  
Above:  
*A View in Delft*  
1653 by Fabritius

Vermeer, lived in Amsterdam from 1648 to 1654. He returned to Delft in 1654 where he worked, like Vermeer's father, in the textile business.

As a distinguished scientist and philosopher, Van Leeuwenhoek would have been aware of Spinoza's free-thinking heresies, which came under severe fire in the late 1660s. Whether or not Vermeer knew about all this remains to be discovered. But he did make two images which show his admiration for the scientists of his time – *The Astronomer* and *The Geographer*; between 1668 and 1669, which sadly are not on view in the current show.

The climax of the exhibition leaves us surrounded by eight works from the last decade of Vermeer's life. All of them are brilliant, but it is *The Art of Painting* which is truly exceptional. Here the painter marshals all his skills and knowledge and takes a leap into new territory, both in form and content.

A richly woven curtain is swept to one side to reveal the painter in his studio. No paint flecked palettes or messy brushes here. All is serene as the elegant model stands dreamily holding a book and brass trumpet. A precious parchment map shows the coast of Holland.

As in *The Milkmaid*, blue and yellow are contrasted to intensify each other, repeated in delicate touches throughout the canvas, enhanced by touches of red, orange and gold. We see the artist from the back as a black silhouette brightened by slashes of his white blouse and the dashes of his red stockings.

The austerity of northern Protestantism, the

latest investigations into perspective and light blossom into a meditation on illusion and artifice and the role of painting in history, which astonishingly deploys the dramatic devices of the Roman Catholic Baroque.

The new complexity of spatial effects and use of symbolic objects, the comment on the role of the painter himself brings to mind another contemporary of the Baroque period, Diego Velasquez. His *Las Meninas*, painted at the same time as *The Milkmaid*, elevates the artist's profession to an equal among his royal patrons. As in Velasquez, there is a controlled passion as the eye roams through those elusive depths and spaces, the interaction of empty and filled volumes, contours of dark and light, to emphasise interval and interaction, movement and tension, the contrast between optical illusion and reality.

Vermeer explores new areas of perception – both visually and emotionally. He gives form to human emotions and interactions – caught at a significant moment in time. He encourages the eye to navigate a specially-designed intellectual journey while at the same time revelling in pure painterly delight. ■

Vermeer and the Delft School, National Gallery until Sept 16. Open 10am-6pm (9pm Wed, Sat, Sun) price £8, £6 concessions, £4 students and 12-18 year olds. Advance tickets by post or in person, telephone 020 7747 2885.

Email: [information@ng-london.org.uk](mailto:information@ng-london.org.uk)

[www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk)

Fire Brigades Union - Merseyside

# Firefighters strike to defend agreement

**THOUSANDS OF FIREFIGHTERS FROM ALL 14 REGIONS IN MAINLAND BRITAIN AND THE NORTH OF IRELAND MARCHED THROUGH LIVERPOOL IN JULY TO CALL CHIEF FIRE OFFICER MALCOLM SAUNDERS' BLUFF.**

THE MARCH COINCIDED with the start of eight days of strike action by the Merseyside brigade while Saunders brought in Green Goddesses manned by the army. The Fire Authority want to appoint as new senior officers non-uniformed staff who have never been firefighters. That would break the Brigade structure in which management must come up through the ranks.

The employers claim they want to promote women and ethnic minorities but are being blocked by the intransigence of a union whose membership is overwhelmingly white and male. But this was given the lie by National Women's Committee and Merseyside FBU member Vicky Knight. She told the rally: "We've been fighting for equality for years before you turned up, Malcolm. But women are not prepared to let you use us as a battering ram against the union. We want equality, not superiority. If you want to pay someone £26,000 to sit in an office, that's up to you, Malcolm. But don't call them Fire Officers."

The FBU stance has been upheld through the internal disputes procedure culminating in a 6-0 ruling at the National Disputes panel (national Employers and Union representatives). But Saunders and the Merseyside Fire Authority decided to press ahead regardless.

Les Skarratts, Brigade Secretary Merseyside FBU said: "FBU members in Merseyside are not surprised by the intransigent stance taken by the Chief Fire Officer as we have been dealing with him for nearly two years and he continues to refuse to listen to anyone else's point of view on every issue. However we are saddened by the stance taken by the Fire Authority in supporting their Chief Fire Officer, who is clearly acting outside of National Conditions of Service. It's a shame that

members of the Fire Authority have shown little regard for public safety or for their employees, the emergency fire control staff, fire officers and firefighters who daily put their lives on the line for the public of Merseyside."

FBU general secretary Andy Gilchrist spelled out the significance of this dispute for the entire FBU membership. "If Saunders can tear up National agreements and Panel decisions, they'll all be at it. The employers can either force Saunders to abide by the May 3rd panel decision or we have a problem at national level. We can recall Conference at a moment's notice. If you sack one firefighter here, you won't have a Fire Service in Britain," Gilchrist warned Saunders directly,

Saunders, as Deputy Chief Fire Officer in West Yorkshire, was responsible for a number of policy decisions which are still having a detrimental effect on the West Yorkshire Fire Service.

In 1995, Saunders refused to pay pension entitlement to firefighters who had been off sick for long periods. These firefighters should have been medically retired. Saunders, in his wisdom, did not regard them as unwell enough to be retired – even though he has no medical expertise.

Following a long legal battle which ended in the Appeal Court, Saunders and the West Yorkshire Fire Authority's actions were found to be illegal. The West Yorkshire public had to foot the bill (estimated at over £3 million).

Another of Saunders' radical ideas was to reduce the number of fire appliances sent to automatic fire alarms. He continually refused to reverse this decision, even after a fire in an old age persons' home was attended by one fire engine and only five firefighters, which is well below the number required to ensure public safety. ■

# SWP: reforming the 'Third Way'

**PHIL SHARPE SHOWS HOW THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY USES REVOLUTIONARY LANGUAGE TO DISGUISE A STRATEGY OF WINNING REFORMS FROM CAPITALISM.**

THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL before 1914 was dominated by the German Social Democratic Party. The SPD's main theoretician was Karl Kautsky, a person of vast knowledge, but who essentially justified a stance of formal revolutionary politics and reformist political practice.

On the eve of the First World War he wrote an article which argued that capitalism was entering a new period of peaceful development, with the aggressive period of imperialist colonialism gradually being replaced by an ultra-imperialist stage of co-operation between the main capitalist powers.

The immediate purpose of Kautsky's article was to defend the opportunist and reformist repudiation of revolutionary politics by the SPD and Second International. A considerable price was paid by the workers of Germany and other European nations when in 1914 imperialism launched a world war with the help of parties like the SPD.

In this century, the practice of revolutionary talk and reformist practice is embodied in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), whose leading theoretician and spokesperson is Alex Callinicos. His new book\* is unusually revealing, however.

Under the impact of globalisation, Callinicos is compelled to try and justify how, contrary to all the evidence, pressure can make New Labour deliver reforms.

The pseudo-radical imagery of the book, as shown by its fierce denunciation of New Labour, cannot gloss over its real content. This defends a strategy in which the struggle for "reforms"

becomes the main emphasis of political practice, and the historical necessity of a socialist alternative to capitalism is relegated to an ambiguous and distant future.

Callinicos would no doubt maintain that the whole purpose of his book is to show the viability of the alternative of socialism in the era of globalisation. But subjective motivations cannot solely define the objective content of a theoretical work. For what his work lacks is a recognition that the contradictions and antagonisms of capitalism are actually developing the historical necessity for a revolutionary change.

Thus to Callinicos globalisation is a mass of facts and figures about the growing internationalisation of production and culture. But his strategic conclusion is the necessity for political struggle on the basis of reform and not revolution. In other words, capitalist globalisation is actually presented as a form of resolving contradictions in reformist terms.

Callinicos accepts that we live in a world of globalisation, of increasingly integrated production, growth of international trade, mobile capital markets, and domination by transnational corporations (TNCs). This is the context in which the ideology of the Third Way arose. It is the contemporary form of the neo-liberal doctrine of the domination of the market and rejection of a significant role for economic state intervention.

But Callinicos is insistent that globalisation does not mean that the national content of capital has dramatically changed. Indeed, he explains, social democratic governments have historically accepted

For, if as Callinicos argues, New Labour has been fooled by the ideology of globalisation, it may be possible to rationally and politically persuade them to change their mind and act more like a traditional social democratic party managing capitalism in statist terms.

Callinicos' idealist approach can be shown in relation to his critique of Gordon Brown's role as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He explains Brown's role primarily in terms of ideological acceptance of

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**...Callinicos criticises New Labour for “a lack of political will” instead of recognising it as the purest expression of the antagonistic interests of capital against labour...**

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Tory and monetarist economic policy: “We thus see that, paradoxically, Brown's formula for reconciling economic efficiency and social equality depends upon his acceptance of the version of neo-liberal economics under whose hegemony British society became far more polarised between rich and poor than it has been for half a century.”

So the requirements of capital are not considered to be the main basis for Brown's policy, but rather Brown has been “fooled” by right-wing economic ideology. Brown has naively defended economic prudence,

low public spending, inequality of income and resources, because he has dogmatically defended monetarism, says Callinicos.

This separation of the needs of capital from ideology has a definite political purpose. It is to show the “reasonable” and “realistic” possibility of the old social democratic project of the modification of the inequality generated within the capitalist system. For it only takes an ideological rejection of economic neo-liberalism and it will then be entirely possible and feasible to revert to a traditional social democratic policy of realising equality through progressive income taxation. In this way, Callinicos become a left-talking version of Roy Hattersley! “The traditional social-democratic strategy for reducing poverty has been the provision of universal benefits financed by redistributive taxation. Such an option is ruled out by New Labour's commitment to the neo-liberal policy introduced in the Thatcher government's first budget of shifting the fiscal burden from direct to indirect taxation (a policy that the IMF and World Bank are now pressing governments to

apply generally). Brown boasts of having reduced corporation tax to 30 per cent, the lowest level of business taxation in the major industrial countries. The effect is to deprive governments of the main redistributive mechanism that could alleviate poverty by transferring resources from rich to poor.”

In his generally descriptive outline of the political nature of globalisation, Callinicos makes no attempt to establish that the contradictions of globalised capitalism enhance the objective (material) and subjective (consciousness and practice) possibility for world revolution. Indeed, the working class makes no appearance as a potential universal and international class that is capable of transforming society.

This is expressed by an effective call for “change from above”. Callinicos castigates New Labour and its Third Way ideology for accepting international inequality and for failing to regulate capitalism in a rational and efficient manner that would facilitate overcoming economic crisis.

Thus Callinicos is implicitly suggesting that better policies from bourgeois politicians can overcome the worst effects of capitalist economics. Hence his criticism is linked to defining New Labour as an expression of “a lack of political will” rather than the purest expression of the antagonistic interests of capital against labour.

Callinicos presents himself as a spokesperson for the global anti-capitalist protests. He argues that it is necessary to oppose the domination of the TNCs because the requirements of capital are increasingly against the needs of human and social progress. But his conclusion is not for revolution as an urgent strategic necessity. For the ideological illusion of New Labour's Third Way, Callinicos argues, is to reject the social democratic project of reformism, while it can still be realised in the era of globalised capitalism.

He concludes: “This analysis does not imply that it is futile to seek reforms. One of the main reproaches against the Third Way is that its policies operate well within the limits set by the requirements of capitalist reproduction. A decent minimum wage, more generous pensions and efficient public transport would not, for example, bring British capitalism tumbling down, yet New Labour shuns them.”

So Callinicos' strategic approach is to show that it is necessary to modify the capital-labour relation in favour of the working class through the



*Workers' struggles are distorted by the SWP*

the economic and political limits imposed by national capital, from Ramsey MacDonald's minority government of 1929-31 to Callaghan's acceptance of IMF dictates in the mid-1970s.

Thus, to Callinicos, New Labour is not a tool of TNCs in the era of globalisation, but is instead a continuation of the traditional social democratic political acceptance of the historic domination of capital:

“Yet, set against the background of history briefly recounted above, these episodes, undeniably important as they are, seem indicative less of the impact of globalisation than of a more fundamental constraint on governments not to engage in actions that threaten the viability of capital, national as well as international.”

In other words Callinicos cannot actually accept that New Labour is the personification of the needs of capital accumulation in the era of globalisation. Instead, he still wants to project New Labour as the management of national capital and so open to pressure from the organised working class.

Hence Callinicos makes an idealist criticism of New Labour for ideologically and politically accepting the dictates of TNCs: “When BMW decided to get rid of its Rover subsidiary in March

2000, the Blair government discovered it was Munich that called the shots, not the local management in Birmingham and Oxford (let alone the politicians at Westminster). On the larger political scene, the sheer size and wealth of the big corporations gives them enormous influence, particularly where, as in the US and Britain, the major parties are largely dependent on business donations to finance their electoral campaigns.”

The reality is far more significant. New Labour did not reluctantly go along with the decision of BMW to shut plants in the UK, but was actually the active agency implementing this decision.

New Labour is the political form of the economic requirements of the TNCs. In contrast, Callinicos tries to abstract the reactionary political and ideological forms of New Labour from its primary economic content. This flawed methodology is based on crude idealism and impressionism. So to Callinicos, New Labour represents the brainwashed puppets of the TNCs, and consequently it is possible to pressurise the Labour government to change course. This illusion is the basis of a reformist strategy to get New Labour to recognise “common sense” and reverse measures of privatisation, etc.

development of trade union struggles for reforms. He is concerned to prove that the working class can still develop such trade union struggles in the era of globalised capitalism. There is no mention of the revolutionary potential of the working class. Instead, he considers the possibility for anti-capitalist protests linking up with trade union struggles, which will “challenge the institutions of capitalist power”.

Callinicos could point to references in his book to the need for discussion about theoretical models for transcending capitalism. Formally and eclectically he does call for revolution: “Bringing such a society into existence will be an arduous task. It will mean a revolution – in other words, a systemic transformation of society, the replacement of one social logic with another.”

But this call is superficial because the essential content of his analysis is to uphold a revival of reformism as an alternative to the anti-reformism of the Third Way ideology of New Labour. He explicitly appeals to the nostalgic reformism of Old Labour as the content of his so-called anti-capitalism: “In an effort to clarify the meaning of anti-capitalism, I set out...nine theses. There is no reason in principle why someone committed to a reformist approach could not accept most or even all of them. During the 1930s Labour left-wingers such as Stafford Cripps envisaged an elected government using constitutional means to force through a programme of socialist reforms over capitalist opposition. A variant of this strategy

could be adapted to seek a series of structural reforms whose culminative effect would be radically to transform global capitalism.

“Beyond broader strategic considerations, demands for specific reformist measures are far from having lost their political resonance: thus opinion polls consistently show strong public support for the renationalisation of Britain’s railways.”

Callinicos’ essential strategic emphasis is upon the continued viability and relevance of reformism in the era of globalisation: “One dimension along which a genuine renewal of the left would develop would be an exploration of the scope for a robust form of social democracy in the era of global capitalism.”

This means Callinicos has to downgrade and gloss over the actual and revolutionary significance of the antagonisms between capital and labour in the historical era of increasing globalisation within the world economy. Ultimately his politics, and those of the SWP, represent an empirical adaptation to globalisation.

Like Kautsky in 1914, Callinicos envisages that once the ideological illusions in aggressive capitalism are undermined, society can evolve into a more peaceful and harmonious form of capitalism, one which will inevitably become socialism. And pigs will fly! ■

\* *Against the Third Way* by Alex Callinicos, Polity Press, £10.99

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