A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly worker



The hidden supreme leader. Mojtaba Khamenei and the crisis-driven growth of irrationality in the Islamic Republic of Iran

- Letters and debate
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No 1608 November 5 2026 Towards a mass Communist Party £1/€1.10

RIOT LOOT BURN

... and SWP's Bakuninism

LETTERS

Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

No understand

In 'Principles and guidelines' (July 16), Mike Macnair describes some good ways of conducting deliberative and decisive meetings, usefully highlighting the value of identifying counterposed motions, as opposed to misusing amendments.

He also rightly talks about allowing motions and amendments to be introduced when the debate reveals the need, and not just according to prior timetables, and allowing "friendly" drafting amendments without a lot of ritual.

While it is true that the chair has the right and the job of maximising the full expression of the actual views and differences across all participants, the author does not dwell enough on the most fundamental rights of democratic meetings: to challenge the chair's actions through points of order or procedure (to be voted on) and the ultimate right to evict the chair - a proposal which must be discussed and voted on before any other discussion continues. The meeting belongs to the body of participants. (Pathological or vexatious challenges will get flushed away by social pressure, so that principle is vital.)

Macnair does not understand the United Secretariat of the Fourth International's 'no-vote', saying: "The old International Marxist Group and its successors, while I was a member, had a fourth category: the 'no-vote'. I was never clear what was the point of a 'no-vote' as distinct from an abstention, and I do not see any point to it now."

If you see a vote recorded as '55-23-4-63', it means 55 for, 23 against, 4 abstaining and 63 not voting. This tells you that something odd is happening. The no-voters might have turned up late and missed the discussion; they might not understand the motion, and don't feel qualified to vote; they might think it's being railroaded, and the vote should be postponed.

All of those things are different from abstention, which says, 'I don't care', 'It doesn't matter which position we take'. With such a large not-voting count recorded, it is obvious that the vote concerned is suspect. Emphasising that, the number not voting in my example is not large enough to have compelled postponement. But, absent the right to record no-votes, all looks well.

Finally, there is a big difference between a vote where simply the numbers for, against, etc are recorded and a 'roll call vote', where the names of voters are recorded, possibly by calling them out from a roll of registered attendees.

The minutes of the founding convention of the US Socialist Workers Party in 1937-38 are helpful in thinking about how to run a democratic, politically purposeful and business-like meeting.

Alex Green
London

No tankies

One thing I find annoying about being a member of the Democratic Socialists of America is that, to follow national-level debates in the organisation, you have to monitor X (the social-media site formerly known as Twitter, owned by the fascist trillionaire, Elon Musk). I get the argument that there is no ethical consumption under capitalism, but X is a Nazi hellhole, algorithmically designed to aggressively boost the far right. Having these debates anywhere else would be an improvement.

Nevertheless, I thought a DSA member who goes by the X handle, 'BrentInQueens', made an interesting point about ideological boundaries within the ecumenical socialist organisation: "If the tent is big enough to include literal Stalinists, it should be big enough to include social democrats and even disaffected liberals." While I'd like to avoid a potentially damaging split, I think some kind of reckoning within the DSA about what socialism means and what kind of organisation it wants to be is inevitable.

BrentInQueens' statement was met with widespread derision. For those who aren't familiar with leftwing subcultures, being accused of liberalism is just about the gravest insult imaginable. The responses came fast and furious. Of course, liberals would never be allowed in the DSA. Social democrats were reluctantly tolerated, and it was only a matter of time before political conditions advanced enough that they could be jettisoned in favour of a more ideologically rigid membership.

I'll put my cards on the table and say I don't view Stalinism as meaningfully socialist in any way. Marxist-Leninist regimes, past and present, have merely swapped private control of the means of production by elite capitalists with private control by elite bureaucrats. On top of this, they have implemented a crushing police state. Liberals and social democrats, using the terms as they are understood now, at least support basic democratic rights. Speaking purely on the merits, I'll take them over tankies.

Thinking strategically, while Stalinists have amassed a significant amount of influence within the DSA, I believe the number of people sympathetic to Marxist-Leninism in the United States is essentially a rounding error and that's not liable to change. Regular people don't want to live in a dictatorship. In contrast, the number of people who identify as liberal is quite large. My guess is - based on the popularity of candidates like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Zohran Mamdani - many of these liberals are in effect social democrats.

Again, if forced to choose, I'm reaching out to liberals and social democrats, not tankies. I think many of the former are actually quite open to genuine democratic socialism. After all, most socialists, so far as I'm aware, are former liberals. But the deep divisions within the DSA are not purely ideological: they're also strategic. The so-called DSA left is sceptical about (if not opposed to) electoralism, while what's called the DSA right supports it. That's why, on 'the left,' you have a Stalinist caucus allied with an anarchist-influenced one.

As many have pointed out, if such factions had their way, the DSA wouldn't have supported Sanders, Ocasio-Cortez and Mamdani, and the organisation would just be another irrelevant leftist sect. It's hard to avoid the conclusion that members of these caucuses would be significantly happier on the pre-2016 left, where I came of age, where they could have presided over a tiny, ideologically-pure fiefdom with no risk of having to dirty their hands with the messy work of pursuing and wielding power in non-ideal circumstances.

At the risk of sounding like an old man, yelling at the youth to get off his lawn, my patience with teenage Soviet cosplayers is increasingly limited. Life is short and I have better things to do than entertain their absurd parsing about what democracy really means. It will be a genuine setback if tankies take greater control of the DSA than they already have, but, ultimately, if they do, I suspect members will vote with their feet and find an organisational home elsewhere. Given the chance, Marxist-Leninists will destroy what makes the DSA special.

Jon Hochschartner
Connecticut

Justified anger

As a regular French reader of the *Weekly Worker*, I was fully expecting to mostly agree with your take on the ongoing protests in France. Imagine my surprise when I read Jean Laurel's despicable article in last week's issue, which, since it is referred to in the main front-page headline, I must imagine is endorsed by the editors in full ('Readying for the next stage', October 29).

The paper aligns with the social-chauvinists and left Bonapartists of La France Insoumise against the evil *casseurs* - monstrous perpetrators of 'criminal actions'. It ends up having a position to the right of both the mass-strikist, industrial-worker-fetishistic Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste-Révolutionnaires and Lutte Ouvrière and the fully opportunistic Révolution Permanente on the riots, who, while rightly pointing out that destroying small shops is counterproductive, correctly recognised street fighting with police and attacks on private property as an expression of fully justified anger against the government, price-gouging capitalists big and small, and police violence in general.

Obviously, looting and acts of violence against the police are not a reliable way to obtain any kind of lasting victory against the aforementioned actors, or to build working class political power. Nobody denies this, except perhaps a few confused insurrectionary anarchists (generally, those who overtheorise rioting have abandoned the class perspective altogether). But the feeling that peacefully demonstrating has little to no effect is widespread among angry protestors, with the line of argument in favour of looting and rioting being that the government doesn't react at all to peaceful mass demonstrations, even when they clearly represent the will of the majority, as we have seen repeatedly since the early 2010s.

This perspective *seems true* to a lot of working class people, when both the 'violent' Gilets Jaunes and the 'violent' October 17 protests were followed by meagre emergency measures, whereas the mostly peaceful 2023 mass protests - supported by an overwhelming majority of the population - had basically no effect on the passing of the pension reform. Describing October 24 as a success in this regard is frankly ridiculous: hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in a relatively peaceful setting, but the police managed to ban protests in most urban centres, where there was rioting the week before, forcing the Paris demonstration onto the outskirts of the city and violently repressing the demonstration in Lyon. The government, feeling that it had returned 'order' to society, went back to ignoring the protestors' demands, after having feigned some interest over the previous week.

Perhaps comrade Laurel and the *Weekly Worker* crew would have joined the French Communist Party in railing against 'irresponsible' street-fighting students in early May 68. Not me. Class-conscious workers and communists should critically support spontaneous revolt, even when it is violent. As for guarding "shops, bars, cafes, offices and other workplaces" against "criminal actions", I say it depends: bourgeois law defines what 'criminality' is, and both strikes and expropriations can be cast as "criminal actions" in many contexts. Price-gouging is criminal, from the point of view of the working class, and reducing the price of commodities in supermarkets to zero by looting them cannot be dismissed as simple criminality without implicitly accepting bourgeois notions of law and order. Was Richard Oastler advocating industrial sabotage in 1836, in order to "teach these law-defying magistrates to have respect for ... the factory law", inciting criminality? Is the *Weekly Worker* opposed to criminal acts in principle?

To be clear, the fact that riotous violence is seen as the only option by thousands of protestors is certainly a sign of working class political disorganisation, but one cannot simply wave away the large number of folk who took part in these actions (30,000 looters in Marseille alone, according to the prefecture) as an "irresponsible minority". The ongoing trials, which usually end in very heavy sentences for the people arrested, underline the point that they are part and parcel of the broader working class: among the accused are Fedex workers, Uber drivers, people moving from one precarious job to another, as inflation gnaws at their living standards.

Finger-wagging will not convince these workers that they were wrong. It is more likely to convince them that communists are disconnected from working class realities in France. These people fought cops because they felt that doing so may help change things. It is certainly true that organising in a Communist Party would be more efficient, but one needs to talk to these courageous workers and support them against police and judicial repression in order to show that communists

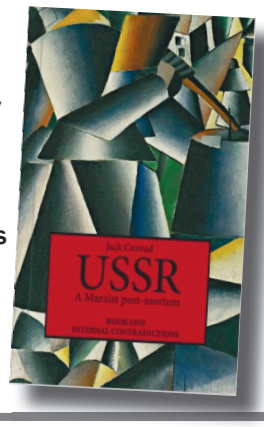
USSR - A Marxist post-mortem
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Fighting fund

Help us get there

Before I report on the start of the November fighting fund, let's just recap how we did in October. As I said last week, we had already exceeded the £2,750 monthly target, and the last couple of days saw another £58 come our way. Thanks to comrades BK (£25), JD and MD (£10 each) and SD (£3), who all made a handy bank transfer, as well as AC (£5 via PayPal) and comrade Hassan (his usual £5 note).

Those last-minute donations took our final total for October up to £2,818 - not a huge surplus, but still a useful £68 over and above the target. Well done, everybody who played their part!

What about November? As I write, we're just completing the first four days of the month and so far we've raised £431. Thank you, comrades AC (£100!), LC and BO (£50 each), MM (£31), CG and RG (£30), DL and MT (£20), CP (£16), AN (£15), MR (£13), RP (£12), MM (£11), DI (£10), MA (£8) and BG (£5). While all the above chipped in via standing order/bank transfer, we also received £5 each from comrades TM and JN, who clicked on that PayPal button.

Not a bad start to the month, but can we keep it up? I really hope so. I can't stress enough how much the *Weekly Worker* depends on the support of our readers, and now we need to go shooting past that £2,750 target in the final two months of 2026. Will you help us do that? Please go to the web address below to see the different ways of contributing. We even take old-fashioned cheques! ●

Robbie Rix

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are aligned with the most combative elements of the class. This, not pointless moralising, is the first, though not the only, step in "building mass support" - a task which is indeed incomplete.

Comrade Laurel verges into conspiracism when explaining the "police's rout" on October 17. He claims that it is "at best, a symptom of the intelligence services' incompetence (which is unlikely), or, at worst, a deliberate strategy to obtain images of vandalism and looting for the media". He should explain to us how he evaluates the likelihood of either of those options in order to declare the first one unlikely. It is possible that the government willingly allowed looters to operate, although it would then probably have to explain itself to the businesses which suffered over a billion euros of damage, and to the insurers who are going to have to pay for a large part of it (two constituencies that the government usually tries to appease, not incense), but the heavy-handed police and judiciary response does not seem to have been calculated to make looting and rioting easy.

As for why the government didn't deploy more riot police, I would like to remind the author that riot squads had been spending the previous weeks repressing student protestors under the guise of fighting "urban violence", and that the government cannot continuously mobilise large numbers of riot police over weeks and weeks, seeing as even these brave Robocops have to take breaks between 'law enforcement' operations.

There are then many possible explanations for the police's inability to keep control of the streets on October 17, and the idea that it was a deliberate plot on the part of the government is not any more likely than the others.

Nicolas Girard
email

Balfour anniversary

In 1917, Britain made a declaration; over a century later, its consequences are still written into the lives of Palestinian refugees. As the Balfour Declaration marks its 109th anniversary, the Palestinian Return Centre (PRC) calls on the British government to acknowledge its historical responsibility for the dispossession of the Palestinian people and issue an unequivocal apology for its role in the historical processes that enabled this injustice.

Issued on November 2 1917 by then foreign secretary Arthur Balfour and incorporated into the framework of the British Mandate for Palestine, the declaration became a cornerstone of British policy, forming part of the historical context in which the Nakba of 1948 unfolded, with the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians.

These consequences are not only visible in the unresolved plight of Palestinian refugees, but also in the continuing loss of homes and the erosion of conditions necessary for Palestinians to remain on their homeland. In 2026, these violations are reflected in stark figures: approximately 5.9 million Palestine refugees are still registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and shattered in the diaspora; more than 4,300 Palestinians were displaced in the occupied West Bank during the first nine months of 2026 alone; and, since the beginning of 2026, approximately 1,790 Palestinians have been displaced after Israeli authorities demolished their family homes across the occupied West Bank.

The Balfour legacy finds its most devastating contemporary expression in Gaza, where Israel's genocidal war has compounded the historical realities of Palestinian dispossession with mass killing and repeated forced displacement. More than 74,000 Palestinians have been killed, while approximately 1.9 million people have been displaced at least once amid relentless Israeli bombardment.

Though in September 2025 Britain formally recognised the State of Palestine, affirming the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination, the PRC stresses that, if Britain's evolving position is to carry meaning beyond diplomatic recognition, it must also address the rights and historical injustices that statehood alone cannot remedy.

The PRC, therefore, calls on the British government to:

- Formally recognise the historical consequences of Britain's role in Palestine, including its contribution to the political circumstances that enabled the dispossession of the Palestinian people, and to issue an unequivocal apology for the injustices to which that policy contributed.
- Extend recognition of Palestinian statehood to the support of Palestinian refugees' fulfilment of their right to return to their homes at the earliest practicable date in accordance with UN general assembly resolution 194 (III), adopted on December 11 1948.
- Support international accountability and the enforcement of international law, including supporting the work and proceedings of the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, and opposing measures that obstruct Palestinians' ability to determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Palestine Return Centre
London

Reparations

The transatlantic slave trade is so fundamental to capitalism that at least five of the seven men whose faces appear on United States banknotes were slaveholders.

Meanwhile, there are two arguments against reparations - one execrable and the other unanswerable. The execrable one is that Britain was barely in the slave trade, made little or nothing out of it, retains no benefit of it, pretty much took it up in order to stamp it out, was successful in doing so. It therefore should not even apologise for it, not least because the slaves were better off than they would have been if they had been kept in Africa.

But the unanswerable one is that the slave trade funded enclosure, so that there has always been one struggle both before and after that period, with most white British people descended from slaves' contemporaries, who were themselves little more than slaves even in law, and less so again in practice.

There are never going to be reparations and no-one seriously expects them; anyone who has ever negotiated anything knows it is best to ask for too much at the start in order to have enough at the end. But there should obviously be an apology. If we had not been wrong before, then why did we change tack? A change of behaviour does not meet the need to apologise as well. Nor does the bad behaviour of other people.

While Tony Blair did say something, in a monarchy the words of a politician are not sufficient. This needs to come from the top - as the king of the Netherlands, on the advice of his ministers (as would be the case here), accepted three years ago.

David Lindsay
Lanchester

History anathema

The liberal, left-hating *Guardian* has run an article on communists who were 'traitors' during the series of post-war governments in Hungary (November 2). No mention is made of the vile fascist regime that existed in the 1930s and was a staunch ally of Hitler throughout World War II.

Hungary went through a series of fascist governments from 1939-45, culminating in the despicable regime of 1944, which deported much of Hungarian Jewry to the death camps. Hungarian troops committed many war crimes alongside the German Nazis on the eastern front. After the crash of 1929, east of the Rhine many of the smaller European states had adopted fascism, mimicking Italy or Germany. Similar regimes arose in Romania, Bulgaria and Greece. Of these only Greece fought against the Axis.

Soviet communism was scant reward for Hungarian communists who survived the war. Initial positive developments were overtaken in later decades by decline, as failure to provide a decent life led to discontent. The structures built by communists to stop western interference, and prevent pre-war elites returning to continue their exploitation of the poor and workers, eventually became repressive organisations such as the Stasi in Eastern Germany.

Such nuanced history is an anathema to western writers of frankly fallacious descriptions of the past. Fortunately the working classes, the poor and the militant youth of Europe can look elsewhere for an explanation of their lives and the lives of those who were their predecessors. And leave the liberal press to their meandering confusions.

K Sean
Kent

Ferdori solidarity

Donato Ferdori, a 56-year-old Italian solidarity activist, remains imprisoned by Israeli occupation forces at Givon prison after he decided to resist deportation. He was among 14 international activists detained on October 29 in al-Lubban al-Gharbi, north-west of Ramallah, while accompanying Palestinian farmers during the olive harvest. The other 13 activists - from Italy, the United States, the UK, Australia, Germany, Ireland and Sweden - have either been placed on deportation flights or are awaiting departure.

During the detention, the activists identified as men were handcuffed and shackled at the ankles, with some chained together in pairs. They were forced to strip to their underwear and searched, had their shoelaces confiscated and were held in a high-security cell. They were subsequently transported to Yahalom Detention Centre in chains.

Ferdori was born in Bologna and currently lives in Rome. He holds a PhD, teaches philosophy, history and the humanities in secondary schools, and is a published author of essays, poetry, a novel and articles on literature, music and cinema. Explaining his decision to join international solidarity efforts in Palestine, he said:

"I stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people, who are viewed by the majority of Israelis and their government as an inferior people - to be used, subjugated, tortured and even exterminated. I can't go on living normally as if this wasn't happening, limiting myself to some statements on social media or participation in demonstrations. For those that can do it, it is necessary to directly oppose - without violence, yet with firm resolve - such crimes against human life and dignity, even confronting the risks that this opposition involves. As common persons, we try to do what the 'international community' should do and, shamefully, does not do."

At the visa revocation hearings, Israeli officials mentioned "public security considerations" as a reason for deportation (likely referring to the false accusation of violating a closed military zone order). The activists were also questioned on supporting so-called "anti-Israel organisations". During the hearings, photographs taken by the settlers while they were attacking Palestinians in the olive groves were laid out on the immigration officer's desk. Given that soldiers joined the settlers only when people were already forced out of the olive groves, the presence of those pictures highlights coordination between the settlers and occupation soldiers.

On October 29, Israeli settlers from the Avichai Farm outpost forced Palestinian farmers and international solidarity activists to abandon the olive harvest in the Artada area of Al-Lubban al-Gharbi. The settlers followed the group into the residential area of the village, where Israeli occupation forces joined them and besieged a house, where the activists had gathered. The occupation soldiers detained all 14, accusing them of violating a closed military zone order, although no such order had been presented to them on the agricultural land. Settlers reportedly remained beside the soldiers throughout. The activists were taken to the police station at the Ni'ilin checkpoint and questioned before visa revocation and deportation proceedings began.

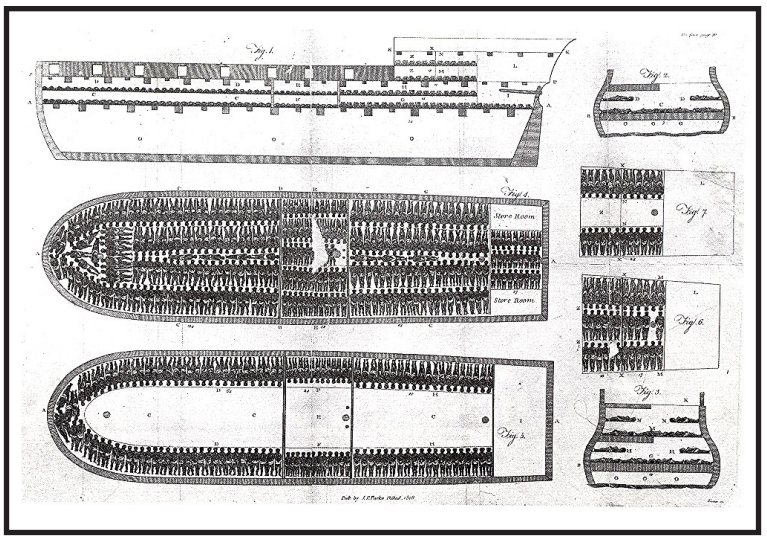
Israeli occupation soldiers also detained and severely beat the mayor of Al-Lubban al-Gharbi. Soldiers damaged property at his carpentry workshop and threatened him, warning him not to return to the agricultural land or bring international activists to the village again.

While 13 activists have either been placed on deportation flights or are awaiting departure, the Italian activist remains in Israeli custody after resisting deportation.

The detentions come amid repeated settler attacks on farmers in al-Lubban al-Gharbi, where the expansion of the Avichai Farm outpost has brought land seizures, restricted access to farmland and displacement. The deportation of international volunteers further weakens the solidarity presence Palestinian farmers have asked for during the harvest.

International Solidarity Movement
email

Online Communist Forum



Sunday November 8 5pm

Slave trade, apologies and apologetics: political report from the CPGB's Provisional Central Committee and discussion

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POLEMIC

Riot, loot and burn

France's huge protest movement began with schoolers and now there is the November 5 general strike. Inevitably the disaffected, the backward, the plain criminal see an opportunity. However, says **Jack Conrad**, the task of Marxists is to raise consciousness, encourage organisation and inculcate discipline

Hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets of France's towns and cities over the last two months. Things began with schoolers protesting against poor classroom conditions, lack of teaching staff and a two-tier education system that leaves most badly disadvantaged. They blockaded their school buildings and marched, marched and marched again. Parents joined them. So did teachers.

Now five trade union federations have organised the November 5 general strike - a much-needed show of strength by the organised working class. After all, next year there are crucial elections. Marine Le Pen is the clear frontrunner to become the Fifth Republic's next president - Jean-Luc Mélenchon is a distant second. If, on April 18 2027, those two are the country's choice, it is not difficult to guess which option bourgeois France will go for in the second round. Given a Le Pen-Mélenchon runoff, pollsters say Le Pen would win by a landslide, with up to 65% of the vote (so-called centrists and moderates either staying at home or voting for her rather than supporting the left).[1]

While a Le Pen presidency does not mean fascism, it does mean a shuddering right turn. We can predict savage state attacks on democratic rights, migrants, pensioners, and the terms and conditions gained by workers over many decades of struggle. That is why November 5 matters. It is, or at least ought to be, about more than expressing much needed solidarity with schoolers. It should certainly be more than an opportunity for routine speech-making, posturing in patriotic red, white and blue sashes and letting off steam. It is, or ought to be, a call to arms, given the distinct danger of a Le Pen presidency and a Rassemblement National-dominated government headed by Jordan Bardella.

While a RN government is by no means a foregone conclusion, France has clearly arrived at a crossroads politically … and economically too. Fitch, the ratings agency, downgraded the country on October 30 from 'stable' to 'negative'. Borrowing rates are already high and a recession is expected after stagnation or contraction during three of this year's quarters. Roland Lescure, economy minister, ominously warns that, without "fiscal consolidation" - ie, still further austerity measures - "we will crash".[2]



Like anarchists, SWP cheers on rioting

Glorifying

Meantime, over at PO Box 74955, *Socialist Worker* has been running authoritative articles glorifying riots and looting. What articles? I have in mind Camilla Royle's 'Streets of Paris burn after day of rage at the system' and more importantly its companion piece, 'The left must defend riots and looting' (October 21). Also Judy Cox's 'Riots aren't mindless - they are political' (October 28). Why authoritative? Both comrades regularly feature in the pages of *Socialist Worker* and, more to the point, both are on the recommended slate for the next central committee, to be elected at the January 8-10 2027 Socialist Workers Party conference.[3]

Their articles follow, in particular, the October 17 mass protests, which saw some 800,000 marching, including 400,000 in Paris alone. Of course, that was not the prime focus of the capitalist media on the day neither in France nor internationally. No, what got column inches and prime airtime was the entirely peripheral clashes between the police and small groups of rioters and looters afterwards - that is, when most people had already headed off home.

There were approximately 2,700 arrests, not a few injuries and a couple of high-profile arson cases. However, it all made for terrific pictures of smashed windows, burning bins, wrecked shops and masked young men being sadistically beaten and tear-gassed by police goons. Something like the same happened on October 24 and October 31 too. Mass demonstrations followed by entirely peripheral clashes between the police and small groups of rioters and looters.

Grist to the mill of the party of law and order. Virtually ignoring the hundreds of thousands peacefully demonstrating, Emmanuel Macron and his prime minister, Sébastien Lecornu, vowed to ensure stiff prison sentences. Simultaneously, they imposed curfews, banned marches and forced those which were permitted, such as in Paris, onto ring roads and outer districts. There was also much talk of outside infiltrators, bringing in the military and even outlawing Mélenchon's La France Insoumise (France Unbowed).

As for Le Pen, she blamed Macron for a lily-livered lack of decisiveness in the face of what she calls a concerted attempt to maximise disruption in the run-up to April 2027. So the black and brown rioters and looters were not just attacked for their *ensauvagement* (savage-like behaviour). They were credited with being "insurrectionary activists", albeit orchestrated by the ultra-left. The aim? Nothing less than bringing about the downfall of western civilisation. Rioting and looting is thereby linked with immigration and a dastardly global conspiracy hatched by sinister forces. George Soros being darkly mentioned.

Naturally, Le Pen and RN line up four-square with the police and rail against the interior ministry for its weak response. Instead there must be the iron fist. Strip citizenship from dual nationals found guilty of rioting or assaulting the police. Parents of minors should have benefits and social housing access withdrawn.

A narrative that has certainly benefited Le Pen and RN. An extra 1%-2% have sought refuge in her camp and helped consolidate her front-runner position with some 34%-38% of the poll. Meanwhile, the potential centrist successors to Emmanuel Macron - Édouard Philippe and Gabriel Attal - have seen their support visibly crumble.

None of that matters much, if at all, for comrades Royle and Cox. Fielding candidates, votes, winning elections, controlling representatives, assembly debates and motions, coalition deals, forming governments - all are almost irrelevant. What really counts *for them* is strikes and streets ... and riots. As if different forms of the class struggle should be counterposed one against the other, rather than concretely evaluated, and, when advantageous, combined, in terms of their strategic usefulness, given this or that historical circumstance.

During the revolutionary year of 1917, the Bolsheviks combined street-corner agitation, conference debates, newspaper polemics, contesting all manner of elections, and not only soviet elections …with political mass strikes, armed demonstrations and finally insurrection. In fact, Marxism does not reject any tactic as a matter of principle. We leave all such nonsense to others. Eg, anarchists and their ilk reject, as a matter of principle, standing in bourgeois elections in the name of proletarian revolution; reformists, on the other hand, reject proletarian revolution, as a matter of principle, in the name of standing in bourgeois elections.

Basically, comrades Royle and Cox present a mirror image of the party of law and order. Hence they not only stand opposed to Macron and Le Pen, but everyone who does not politically defend - even fete - rioters and looters. Comrade Royle thereby insists that Jean-Luc Mélenchon is wrong to distance himself from "looting and pillaging". He is further taken to task for posting on social media that: "Whatever the responsibilities of those in power and their incompetence and their violence, we must refuse to take part in actions without political meaning and contrary to our methods."

Let us ask comrades Royle and Cox this simple question. Should the left "take part" in looting and pillaging? They do not expressly say 'yes'. But the implication is that we ought to ... or at the very least that we ought to incite, cheer on, politically tail, rioting and looting.

After all, *Socialist Worker* readers are positively assured that "riots work" and "looting works". It forces governments to invest in deprived areas. Sometimes, admittedly, but hardly always. It gets rid of hated laws. Again, sometimes, but hardly always. In fact, rioting and looting often invites especially draconian legislation. Again, rioting and looting grabs media headlines, which peaceful protests fail to do. True, but so what? After all, we are talking about the *capitalist* media. It not only has to sell advertising, it has its own political agenda. The fact that mass, peaceful demonstrations do not get a look in should, once again, underline the need for our own mass media.

Along the exact same lines, we are told that looting "enables the poor to enjoy the exclusive commodities held up as symbols of success". Looting also "means families get basic necessities they can't afford". Even this: "Looting - or 'proletarian shopping' - is an effective means of direct expropriation." Rioting and looting, it should be added, is a fast track into the criminal 'justice system' and more poor sods rotting away in overcrowded, rat-infested prisons.

Riots are admittedly "chaotic and destructive, especially when rioters are prevented from reaching centres of power and wealth." Apparently, though, while many can understand the "looting of designer stores", they "recoil from the destruction of small, family-owned businesses."

But don't worry. All "serious protests", from civil disobedience to strikes, make life difficult for some ordinary people. To provide revolutionary justification the 1960s Black Panther, Assata Shakur, is approvingly quoted. Asked to condemn rioters who set fire to their own neighbourhoods, she replied: "They don't own those stores. I'm glad they burned down those stores because those stores were robbing them in the first place." Which only goes to show how politically disorientated Assata Shakur was at the time (after being arrested on murder charges, she escaped and ended her life in Cuban exile). For the SWP to elevate Shakur into one of their authorities, when it comes to rioting and looting, testifies to the fact that today it is politically disorientated.

We would never join the reactionary clamour for the police to hunt down rioters. On the contrary, communists demand an amnesty, a demand we would justify by citing their age, inexperience, desperation and lack of disciplined organisation. But to express approval is a dereliction of our duty to provide programmatic leadership and an alternative to the dead-end of rioting and looting. In that strategic context too, expressing approval of rioting and looting guarantees that we fail to win potential allies: indeed it drives the petty bourgeoisie straight into the arms of the far right.

Historically

Mélenchon "rightly blames the state for the breakdown in public order" and he "rightly reaffirmed his support for the demands of school student protestors and solidarity with those facing police violence". However, he is "wrong", says the SWP, when he maintains that looting does not have any "political meaning". Here, at least, the comrades are on firmer ground. Looting does have a political meaning.

Before exploring that subject, allow a brief aside. I will momentarily appoint myself as Jean-Luc's defence attorney. What my client is saying here is that rioters and looters have no *coherent political programme*. If that is what he meant, and I think that is beyond reasonable doubt, would comrades Royle and Cox disagree? Readers of the *Weekly Worker* can act as judge and jury.

If we view rioting and looting

historically, there can be no doubt whatsoever that this form of the class struggle occurs and constantly reoccurs. Anyone even with a passing knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome will be familiar with the numerous instances of the demos, the plebs, the townspeople, the peasantry, protesting using their *most effective* weapon: they could riot.[4] While not a daily event, the possibility of a riot "was always there, and there was no hesitation to join the action".[5] One popular form of riot was to lynch a detested official, or burn down the houses of local big wigs deemed responsible for this or that popular misfortune.

In the best-case scenario that resulted in the citizen-peasant democracy of Athens or, falling somewhat short of that, the so-called mixed, balanced, popular-elite constitution of republican Rome, but in both cases there were coherent politics involved - crucially from below (albeit, as it comes down to us in written form, as articulated by members of the ruling class).

Obviously, such outcomes were the exception, not the rule. Riot and looting was mostly economic. Peasants in medieval Europe rebelled against food shortages and excessive tithes and taxes. If strong enough, they would overrun the local manor house, seize stores of food, cloth and drink. Again, if strong enough, they would head off to the nearest urban centre. Here, often in an alcohol-driven frenzy, the palaces of the local baron and bishop were set ablaze. After that it was the turn of the Jewish money-lending class. What goes for ancient and medieval times has essentially continued into modern times.

Eric Hobsbawm famously wrote about "collective bargaining by riot".[6] Eg, in the 1760s the silk weavers of Spitalfields frequently took to the streets of the City of London and broke into the homes of masters who paid below subsistence wages. Before effective trade unions, this is what effective industrial action looked like.

However, there have been notable *political* riots: the 1780 anti-Catholic, anti-government Gordon riots, the repeated riots during the course of the great French Revolution, including the celebrated 1789 storming of the Bastille, Beijing's May 4 1919 riot, Detroit's 12th Street riot in 1967, the 1969 Stonewall riot, the 1990 Trafalgar Square anti-poll tax riot, etc, etc.

Our epoch

But, given our present epoch, riot and looting are *primitive* forms of the class struggle. That was certainly the considered opinion of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Two examples, both from Engels: one con, the other pro.

The West End riot was not at all to his liking. On Monday February 8 1886 the Fair Trade League organised a meeting in Trafalgar Square. The promise was that their policy of higher customs tariffs would act as a cure for unemployment. Not a few "genuine working men attended".[7] The Social Democratic Federation rallied the unemployed for a counterdemonstration. Henry Hyndman, John Burns and Henry Hyde Champion delivered "very injudicious and dangerous speeches" (Hyndman's words).[8] All in all, they did their utmost to fire up their crowd, so that they would, in the words of *Socialist Worker*, "rage against the system".

According to Old Bailey records, Burns told them that the House of Commons was "composed of capitalists who had fattened upon the labour of the working men, and in this category he included landlords, railway directors and employers, who, he said, were no more likely to legislate in the interests of the working men than were the wolves to labour for the lambs". To hang them, he said, "would be to waste good rope and, as no good to the people was to be expected from these 'representatives', there must be revolution to alter the present state of things. The people who were out of work did not want relief, but justice."[9]

To avoid a violent clash with the Fair Traders, SDF leaders then led their people away from Trafalgar Square, down Pall Mall and towards Hyde Park for a hastily planned meeting at the Achilles statue. Burns headed the march, carrying a red flag.

Trouble began almost straightaway, at the Reform Club. Arrogant aristocrats, members of the high bourgeoisie and their paid retainers jeered at them. Bits of rubbish were thrown. This provoked the unemployed to retaliate with stones. The club's windows were shattered. After that what was now an enraged mob set about looting shops, especially vintners, tailors and hosiers, along Piccadilly and South Audley Street. Respectable ladies had purses and jewellery snatched. Some bright sparks set up impromptu stalls to sell off their ill-gotten gains. Only when they reached Oxford Street did the police intervene. The three SDF leaders were arrested and charged with seditious conspiracy. All were acquitted.

The SDF leaders, like the SWP today, deluded themselves that there was something revolutionary about rioters smashing windows and looting shops. Hyndman stupidly hailed the West End riot as "the beginning of the great English Revolution of the 19th century".[10]

Engels was withering. Writing to August Bebel in Berlin, he told the story of the West End riot, as recounted to him by Karl Kautsky (a first-hand witness). Engels accused the SDF of mobilising rogues, idlers, the lumpenproletariat, many of whom were just "out for a lark". Moreover, by encouraging hooliganism, Hyndman and co had "done an irreparable damage to the movement": socialism had been "identified" with looting. SDF leaders had tried to "conjure up a movement by force and overnight", without carrying out the necessary long-term organisational work among the mass of working people, and for what? "[C]hildish actions such as we are usually accustomed to seeing only from the anarchists."[11]

The 1889 dockers' strike was an entirely different matter. Here was a traditionally unorganised, wretched, impoverished section of the working class in London's East End. Most were hired casually on a daily basis. One violently competed with the other at the dock gates in an attempt to get chosen by a foreman. They could be laid off after just an hour's work. However, with the help of the left activists, such as Ben Tillett, Tom Mann and John Burns … and a substantial donation from Australian dockers, they began to unionise.

On August 12 the strike began in the South-West India Dock. By August 20 it involved some 40-45,000. The key demands were 6d per hour pay, 8d for overtime and the abolition of the hated 'call-on' system. The strike proved a tremendous success. London's docks were brought to a complete standstill and on September 16 the dispute was officially concluded. Substantial concessions were gained, including the 'docker's tanner' and the abolition of the 'call-on' system.

What impressed Engels was the discipline. He contrasted it with the regrettable Pall Mall and Piccadilly scenes. When the dockers marched, they did so peacefully, maintained strict internal order and prevented any looting. Engels wrote that, when the organised working class takes the lead, rioters and looters are pushed aside, noting that "a ne'er-do-well who tried to go on a rampage would simply be put down" by the workers themselves.[12]

Unlike the Marx-Engels team - who centred their strategy on organising the working class into a mass party, contesting elections and leaving behind primitive forms of the class struggle - Mikhail Bakunin, the founder of modern anarchism, decried working class discipline, contesting elections and took an entirely positive attitude towards the lumpenproletariat and its riots and looting.

Bakunin saw rioting and looting as a necessary prerequisite for establishing his stateless commune - his revolutionary philosophy being encapsulated in this line, written in 1842: "The passion for destruction is, at the same time, a creative passion."[13] For Bakunin, revolution cannot be planned by a mass political party or an electoral majority used as its midwife. Revolution has to be an elemental act from below (albeit secretly directed by one of his largely fanciful conspiratorial operations). Riots and looting, the 'negative', culminate in the 'positive' - the state, the church, the law courts, the army and all that old crap being swept away in a joyful tsunami of destruction.

Interestingly, revealingly, to provide underpinnings for their argument, we find comrades Royle and Cox turning not to Bakunin himself. As they should. Rather they turn to Vicky Osterweil's *In defence of looting* (2020) and Delio Vasquez's *The poor person's defence of riots* (2014). In other words, anarchist and semi-anarchist 'experts'. Hence we read this 'History and theory' version of second-hand Bakuninism from comrade Cox:

> Rioting and looting are disturbing to the establishment because they disrupt the core assumptions of capitalist society - the legitimacy of private property and the right of the police and military to protect it. When something is looted, it ceases to be a commodity and is removed from the cycle of exchange and profit. It is liberated through shared activism - rioting and looting are not individual acts.

The third generation of SWP leaders clearly represent political retrogression. One might just as well praise professional criminal gangs, such as the Triads, the Mafia, the Krays, the Yakuza and the Medellín and Cali cartels. Well organised and strictly hierarchal, these collectives disrupt the "core assumptions of capitalist society" and the "right of the police and military to protect" private property. Through "shared activism" they remove commodities from the *usual* "cycle of exchange" and into the *illegal* "cycle of exchange". Those at the top amass fabulous riches.

We arrive at the core of the argument between Bakuninism and Marxism. Bakuninism focuses on the distribution of property and the tyranny of the state. Marxism focuses on the mode of production and the organisation of the working class. Liberating luxury and everyday consumer items from their legal owners, leaves the state intact and capital still in control of the means of production. In short, robbery, no matter how dressed up, has nothing to do with organising the working class into the ruling class, gradually socialising production, beginning with the commanding heights, and the transition to a stateless society.

Russia

The Marx-Engels hostility towards rioting and looting in the modern epoch was upheld by the Socialist (Second) International, including the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

Hence, writing in 1903, Lenin outlines a plan for party committees to organise agitation amongst the rural poor. He argues that, instead of leaving peasants to blind, spontaneous actions, such as breaking into the landlord's barns and looting the grain (which leaves them open to tsarist accusations that they are common criminals), the social democrats should, instead, beginning cautiously, forge a class alliance with the peasant masses. He urges his comrades to distribute leaflets to the peasantry, starting with the more intelligent, those who can read. The immediate task is to popularise the RSDLP's three main demands: (1) political liberty, (2) an elected national assembly, (3) abolishing all forms of bondage suffered by the peasantry.

The peasantry needs coordination with the urban working class. Lenin recommends strikes in the busy agricultural season of harvesting. By taking this approach, Lenin believes, the peasants will come to recognise the advantages of disciplined action over rioting and looting.[14]

During 1905 there is nothing that can be found in Lenin's writings about the camp of revolution indulging in rioting and looting. True, there is the slogan, 'Loot the looters'. But, as Lenin later insisted, that had nothing to do with individual gain, not even of a single kopeck. However, maintaining party finances became an urgent necessity after December's defeat in Moscow. The Bolsheviks organised the seizure of arms and broke into banks to obtain badly needed funds. Stalin (comrade Koba) proved to be particularly successful in secretly directing the expropriation work conducted by Bolshevik fighting squads in the Caucasus. Hundreds of thousands of roubles were channelled abroad to the Bolshevik treasury.

The Bolsheviks never called such seizures 'robbery'. It was always 'expropriation' as in the 'expropriation of the expropriators'. True, the Mensheviks raised a stink. So did Leon Trotsky. Doubtless for factional reasons, the 4th (Stockholm) Congress in 1906, and the 5th (London) Congress in 1907, of the *temporarily* unified RSDLP condemned the "unauthorised expropriations" carried out by the Bolshevik fighting squads. Supposedly their actions resembled criminal looting and gave the party a bad name. The Mensheviks, the Bund, the Poles voted for the resolution. Eventually the Bolsheviks chose to diplomatically abstain. A calculated manoeuvre. The resolution was studiously ignored. Expropriations only came to an end in 1908, when it was recognised by all factions, the Bolsheviks included, that the revolution was not about to revive. The fighting squads disbanded and slow, patient, mass work re-emphasised.

Where Lenin discusses rioting and looting in 1905, it appears in the context of condemning Okhrana agents, Black Hundreds and heavily intoxicated lumpen mobs for their attacks on Jewish businesses, synagogues and neighbourhoods. He brands them the "scum of the population", who are cynically used by tsarism to divert economic discontent. There were repeated pogroms and full-scale massacres of Jews. Lenin calls local Bolshevik appeals for "aid in money and arms most timely".[15] He envisages the future revolutionary army executing the organisers, along with looters. Note, Lenin wrote as an *onlooker*, from "afar", from the hateful "abroad", mostly Switzerland.[16]

Not the case with Trotsky. He was on the ground - indeed he was elected to chair the St Petersburg soviet, till December's Moscow uprising, the storm centre of revolutionary events. Here the phenomenon of workers breaking into state-owned liquor stores, getting hopelessly drunk and causing a terrible nuisance was far too common. He blamed desperate peasants and the unorganised as the main culprits. A convenient alibi, which excused *organised* workers, who by tradition were undoubtedly also more than prone to drink to excess. The danger was therefore clear: the revolution would drown in an orgy of drunkenness.

Trotsky already had the splendid example of the Ivanovo-Voznesensk strike before him. The very first act of its soviet included shutting down all liquor stores. Its workers' militia patrolled the streets and, when they caught some drunk, they would confiscate bottles of booze and smash them in the gutter. If needed, the workers' militia would detain the drunk for a short period till they had sobered up. An approach which confirms the Marxist viewpoint: a revolution is not the absence of order, but the replacement of bourgeois order with proletarian order. As vividly described in his book, *1905*, Trotsky applied this model to St Petersburg.

The year 1917 is also instructive. This time Lenin was on the ground (well before Trotsky). He therefore knew all about workers and soldiers - ie, our people - breaking into "liquor shops and wine cellars". However, it was after the Bolshevik overthrow of the provisional government that the problem reached crisis point.

The Winter Palace had massive wine cellars. There were many priceless vintages. The ultimate temptation for those after luxury goods that they could otherwise never hope to obtain through the *usual* "cycle of exchange". Soldiers swarmed to the Winter Palace and got hopelessly drunk. The 'wine pogrom' began. Soldiers sent to the Winter Palace in the attempt to restore order got hopelessly drunk too. For days on end, drunken soldiers roamed the streets of Petrograd. John Reed testifies that the hand of the counterrevolutionaries soon became apparent. They distributed maps to soldiers showing the location of liquor stores. Pitched battles between drunken soldiers and the Red Guards followed.

Finally, amidst mounting chaos, the Military Revolutionary Committee dispatched sailors and machine gunners, who "mercilessly fired upon the rioters".[17] Many were killed. Lenin himself stepped in, writing furious directives declaring an emergency. The Committee to Combat Looting was established in December 1917 with a hundred "absolutely reliable" serving commissars.[18] This precursor of the Cheka was headed by Vladimir Bonch-Bruyevich.

Wine cellars were invaded. Bottles and barrels smashed. There was even the use of dynamite. Orders were issued, chillingly stating that anyone caught looting, robbing or getting publicly drunk would be shot on the spot. The revolution had to be saved and that could only be done through establishing proletarian order ●

Notes

1. France 24 English - www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQkuSvnCFkE.
2. *Le Monde* October 31 2026.
3. *Preconference Bulletin* No1, October 2026.
4. GEM de Ste Croix *The class struggle in the ancient world* London 1983, p318.
5. R Knapp *Invisible Romans* London 2013, p41.
6. E Hobsbawm *Labouring men: studies in the history of labour* London 1986, p7.
7. Engels to August Bebel *MECW* Vol 47, New York NY 1995, pp406-10.
8. HM Hyndman 'The West End riots' *The record of an adventurous life* - www.marxists.org/archive/hyndman/1911/adventure/chap24.html.
9. www.oldbaileyonline.org/record/t18860405-465.
10. Quoted in M Sullivan 'Rioting and Marxism' *What Next?* No19, 2001.
11. Engels to August Bebel *MECW* Vol 47, New York NY 1995, pp406-10.
12. Engels to Eduard Bernstein *MECW* Vol 48, London 2001, pp364-65.
13. www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1842/reaction-germany.htm.
14. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 6, Moscow 1977, p425.
15. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 9, Moscow 1977, p204.
16. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 10, Moscow 1977, p19.
17. J Reed *Ten days that shook the world* Harmondsworth 1970, p245.
18. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 44, Moscow 1977, p48.

USA

Revolutionary road to democracy

With the Democrats taking control of both houses of Congress and a much-expanded DSA contingent, it might appear that the US constitution has proven itself fit for socialist purposes. That is far from the case, argues **Ian F**. America needs a new, democratic, constitution

Donald Trump's second term has generated a constitutional crisis. In the span of just two years, Trump has won immunity for essentially all presidential acts, including:

- attempted election-rigging; pursued a series of more or less explicit quid-pro-quo corruption schemes on a scale and transparency once unimaginable (the inauguration fund, the alleged sale of presidential pardons, the slush-fund crypto empire, to name just a few);
- unleashed squadrons of poorly-trained, masked goons in unmarked cars, who are effectively encouraged to murder people in the streets to generate viral content for executive branch social media accounts;
- launched a war against Iran without Congressional approval, which he openly describes as mere semantics; implemented an overly politicized domestic anti-terrorism strategy against his political enemies that has already resulted in hundreds of years of prison sentences for conduct as innocent as moving leftist literature;
- withheld billions in Medicaid funding from Democrat-controlled states on spurious fraud claims.

Given everything that has taken place, how should socialists understand the constitution? Is it a covenant with heaven handed down to us from posterity? Are Trump's excesses punishment for our insufficient belief in and practice of the framers' creation? Or does the document enable the plutocratic order, whose pro-oligarchy policies are the substantive core of Trump's presidencies?

As Marxists, we recognize that the truest foundation and most explanatory feature of any social order is its mode of production and the relationships between the classes - defined by their positions *vis-à-vis* the means of production - who constitute that order. But analysis of the social order does not end there. The US political order is built also on a legal order defined by the structures outlined in the constitution. Given its centrality in the construction of the social order, the constitution's transformation amounts to a *sine qua non* of democratic revolution.



Howard Chandler Christy 'Scene at the signing of the constitution of the United States' (1940)

Provisions

When they hear the word 'constitution', many Americans, including many socialists, think of the rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights - the rights to free speech and assembly, the right to be free of unlawful searches and seizures, the right not to testify against oneself, the right to due process, etc. These rights are vital and are critical demands of any socialist project. However, this focus overlooks the constitution's structural provisions, which define how our government works, including, and especially, how American politics converts, or fails to convert, popular policy preferences into government action.

The constitution's structural provisions impede democratic decision-making, shelter important policymakers from accountability and unfairly empower the nation's smallest, least demographically representative states. These characteristics are neither inadvertent nor value-neutral; instead, they provide socio-economic elites multiple tools to veto policy favored by popular majorities - exactly as the framers intended. At the same time, these elites have developed mechanisms to push reactionary policy through aspects of the system that are especially anti-democratic, such as the electoral college, presidential veto, executive order power and judicial review.

Article I addresses the legislature, article II the executive, and article III the judiciary. Each of these three structural articles contains critical limitations on democratic governance, while providing elites with tools to implement their own demands.

The constitution's first article provides for a bicameral legislature: that is, a legislature composed of two independent bodies with a shared responsibility to pass legislation. The US is an outlier in this regard: two-thirds of countries have just one national legislative body. Americans are taught that the oddity of providing two bodies with overlapping rulemaking powers is a product of the framers' genius checks-and-balances design. In fact, its purpose and effect are sinister and not salutary.

Historically, bicameralism has functioned as a check on the power of democratic majorities. Upper houses were generally appointed by the monarch or else consisted of positions held by the nobility and passed on to their heirs. These bodies, such as the UK's House of Lords, had the power to veto actions taken by their corresponding democratically elected 'lower' houses (in Britain's case, the House of Commons). As nations have democratized, most bicameral arrangements have evolved into true or pseudo-unicameral systems. Six of the eight bicameral states in Europe are weakly bicameral, in the sense that the upper chamber has lost its power to veto the lower chamber's actions. This happened, for example, when the UK's House of Lords lost parity with the Commons in 1911.

In our context, bicameralism serves the same anti-majoritarian purpose as it once did in constitutional monarchies. But it also has a more idiosyncratic purpose: giving small states disproportionate power over national decision-making. Unlike most of those constitutional monarchies, however, American bicameralism has not evolved in the pseudo-unicameral direction. Rather, the Senate retains not only its power to veto actions taken by the House, but also retains special privileges - such as the power to confirm judicial and executive branch nominees and to decide impeachment - that the House does not have and over which it exercises no control.

How does our bicameral system work? Article I provides that, while representation in the House is proportional to the population (ie, each representative represents roughly the same number of citizens), representation in the Senate is determined at the state level: each state is entitled to two senators, regardless of its population. Thus, Wyoming's 600,000 residents have the same number of senators as California's 40 million. This arrangement gives each resident of Wyoming about 70 votes in the Senate for each Californian's one vote.

The structural imbalance of apportioning power based on states rather than people consistently creates anti-majoritarian Senates. Almost a quarter of the Senate is elected by 12 states whose combined population is less than 5% of the national population. Between the 65th and 99th Congresses, seven out of 34 Congresses contained senatorial majorities composed of senators representing a minority of American citizens. In other words, Congress is patently non-majoritarian more than 20% of the time.

This unrepresentative arrangement is not policy-neutral. Out of the 25 least populated states, 15 are reliably Republican, two are swing states, and eight are more or less reliably Democratic. This means that Republicans are structurally favored by the disproportionate representation afforded to less populated states. This arrangement is also wildly unfair from a racial standpoint, as small states in the United States are disproportionately white compared to the national population.

In addition, small-state senators generally have smaller, more uniform constituencies with strongly aligned political interests. Thus, they exercise outsized authority over issues of interest to them. While New Yorkers, for example, have a strong interest in national agricultural policy, a senator from Iowa exercises far greater control over agricultural issues than does a New York senator, because agricultural issues are disproportionately more important to Iowans than to New Yorkers. An Iowa senator can trade away their vote on urban issues, which are of less significance to their voters, but a New York senator must account for urban issues, while also trying to win favorable agricultural policy.

If the Senate were merely a ceremonial body like the House of Lords, its anti-democratic nature would be a historical curiosity. Unfortunately, no bill can become law unless it is approved by the Senate in the same form as the House. In other words, the Senate has a veto over the House's actions. To say this has real-world implications is to undersell its centrality to all national policymaking. To take a recent example, the House passed the Build Back Better program, which contained substantial social investments: universal pre-K[1], paid family and medical leave, and free community college, among others. The bill died in the Senate and was reworked into the Inflation Reduction Act, which consisted primarily of tax breaks and investment incentives to accelerate green investment, and contained none of Build Back Better's social programs.

The Senate also has exclusive authority to approve presidential nominations to executive offices and judicial seats and to approve treaties. The House plays no role whatsoever in approving these appointments, leading to lasting damage. For example, Clarence Thomas was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1991 after the Senate voted 52 to 48 to approve his nomination. The 48 votes against Thomas' nomination represented 52% of the US population. With this undemocratic appointment, the Republicans stole one of just nine Supreme Court seats for more than 30 years.

Not only does the constitution establish the Senate as a profoundly undemocratic body, but it prohibits the population from ever remedying this situation. Article V, which provides the process for amending the constitution, contains an exception to the process for constitutional amendments: "No state, without its consent, shall be deprived of its equal suffrage in the Senate." In other words, Wyoming shall be entitled to Senate representation equal to California's, regardless of their disproportionate populations, unless Wyoming decides to allow California to be fairly represented in the Senate (ie, to have more senators than Wyoming). We should not hold our breath.

Imperial presidency

Perhaps no aspect of the constitution has experienced 'mission creep' to quite the degree as the presidency. American presidents have exploited article II's vague language, creating the executive branch to greatly expand the scope and nature of presidential power. Article II's anti-democratic provisions fall into two categories: the undemocratic manner of electing the president via the electoral college and the president's ill-defined and potentially unlimited powers.

The electoral college is perhaps the most peculiar aspect of the constitution. No other nominally democratic system has anything like it. The US president is neither directly elected by the population, as, for example, the president of France, nor chosen by members of the representative legislative body, as is the prime minister of the UK. Instead, the president is chosen by a group of electors, called the electoral college, who are chosen through processes that differ from state to state. If no candidate wins a majority of the electoral college votes, the matter is decided by the House of Representatives, but on a 'one state, one vote' basis.

This process frustrates majoritarian rule in multiple ways. First, states are allotted electoral college electors based on their congressional representation (ie, by adding the state's number of senators to its number of representatives in the House). As in the Senate, this system undemocratically favors small states, which are disproportionately whiter and more conservative. Only five states have electoral college allotments proportional to their share of the national population - the 45 other states are either over- or under-represented. Next, except in Nebraska and Maine, every state awards all its electoral college votes to whichever candidate wins the popular vote in that state. Thus, votes for the losing candidate in a state are, in effect, uncounted; this phenomenon is well-known to voters and has the effect of depressing turnout, which depresses overall political engagement - an especially important consideration for progressive causes, whose supporters are less reliable voters than are conservatives. In a political system in which presidential elections are the only engagement of many voters, this 'winner takes all', 'first past the post' arrangement demobilizes large segments of the population, favoring reactionary policies supported by the older, whiter and wealthier voters - who are the nation's most reliable voting demographic.

These aspects of the electoral college system have repeatedly resulted in anti-democratic presidential elections. For example, Republicans have won three of the past six presidential elections; in two of those, they lost the popular vote but won the electoral college - as happened in 2016, when Trump won the electoral college, but lost the popular vote by more than three million.

If neither candidate wins a majority, the House chooses the president, voting on a 'one state, one vote' basis instead of its representative basis. This happened in 1800 and 1824. It almost happened in 1992, when Ross Perot attracted nearly enough votes to deprive both Clinton and Bush of a majority.

Once elected in this anti-majoritarian manner, the president enjoys significant and ill-defined powers. Prominent among these are the right to veto legislation, to drive the nation's foreign policy, to issue executive orders, to oversee the executive branch's implementation of congressionally-passed legislation, to nominate judges and heads of executive agencies, to pardon federal crimes and, most troublingly, to do virtually anything they decide is necessary to respond to so-called 'emergencies', which the president has unilateral and unchecked power to declare.

Article II empowers the president to veto legislation passed by Congress - a veto which can be overturned only by a supermajority of both houses. The presidential veto has been used frequently - 2,584 times in American history (by comparison, SCOTUS[2] has invalidated just 160 laws) - and is almost always effective: only 112 (4%) of these 2,500-plus vetoes have been overridden. That is a 95% success rate for the veto of the legislation that manages to slip past the anti-democratic Senate. (Among countries with an executive veto, only Cyprus has a higher veto success rate, and that is because Cyprus does not have an override procedure.)

Not only can a president unilaterally prevent the passage of legislation, but can also take pseudo-legislative actions through the issuance of executive orders. Presidential records identify 14,036 such executive orders, but historians estimate that as many as 50,000 have been issued in total. Illustrative examples of executive orders include the interning of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps during World War II and Trump's ban on Muslim travel and immigration to the US.

Presidents also have the unbridled and irreversible power to pardon violations of federal law. This power has been used repeatedly to

evade consequences for some of the most anti-democratic behavior in US history. Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon for crimes related to the Watergate scandal (an effort to undermine the Democratic Party's presidential campaign that involved breaking into the Democratic Party's headquarters: Nixon was re-elected). George HW Bush pardoned high-ranking officials involved in the Iran-Contra scandal, in which the CIA and others circumvented Congress's explicit prohibition against further aiding the anti-Sandinista Contra rebels in Nicaragua (some of the most bloodthirsty reactionaries in the history of Central America).

Approval

The president nominates not only positions within the executive bureaucracy, but also federal judges at every level. Both require approval by only the Senate; the House plays no role in these processes. Presidents, especially Trump, have also found ways to circumvent even the Senate's approval by making recess appointments (ie, appointments while Congress is in recess) and 'interim' appointments, both of which allow the appointee to exercise the powers of an approved leader without senatorial oversight. Trump has become notorious for this practice, at times employing an upper-level executive branch composed primarily of appointees.

The constitution provides almost no limits on the president's foreign policy powers. Presidents have circumvented the provision giving Congress the exclusive right to declare war by intervening without formally declaring war (Congress has not declared war since World War II). The US has intervened, either militarily or politically, without Congress having declared war, to effect or attempt regime change in at least the following countries: Korea, Guatemala, Iran, Syria (multiple times), Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Haiti (multiple times), Ecuador, Congo, Chile, Lebanon, Iraq (multiple times), Grenada, Libya (multiple times), Nicaragua, Somalia, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Pakistan. And this is just the post-World War II list. Presidents from both parties have used the vague 'Authorization for the Use of Military Force', passed in the wake of 9/11, as justification to bomb dozens of countries, spending $8 trillion in the process.

Similarly ill-defined is the open-ended notion that the reference in clause 1 of section 1 of article II to "the executive power" (which is not defined anywhere in the constitution) grants the president the power to do whatever they deem necessary (to what end is unclear) in times of exigency or emergency. This provision gives the president *carte blanche* to undertake whatever actions they unilaterally deem necessary to respond to the emergency they themselves declared, and which no one can countermand.

Scarier still, the president is essentially beyond recall. In many other democratic states, the executive is subject to recall by a parliamentary majority. This is why Liz Truss lasted less than two months as UK prime minister. In the US, by contrast, the only mechanism for removing an incompetent or unpopular president is the impeachment process, which requires not just a majority vote in the House, but a supermajority vote in the Senate. No American president has been removed via this process - not Andrew Johnson, Richard Nixon or Donald Trump. Remember that Trump led the January 6 insurrection - an attempted coup - while in office, and yet was not removed via the impeachment process.

Article III provides the framework for the federal judiciary, and its provisions for the judiciary are rather limited: it provides for the creation of a Supreme Court of undefined size, empowers Congress to create lesser federal courts (ie, district and circuit courts), provides for lifetime appointment of federal judges, and empowers Congress to recall judges via the impeachment process. While the constitution does not explicitly grant the Supreme Court this power, SCOTUS awarded itself the power to review and invalidate state and federal laws, regulations and actions soon after ratification of the constitution, rendering SCOTUS as the ultimate arbiter of all constitutional questions.

The first anti-democratic aspect of the federal judiciary is its membership. Judges are nominated by the president, who is not democratically elected, and approved by the unrepresentative Senate. Fully 24% of the federal judiciary, including three of the nine SCOTUS justices, were nominated by Trump during a term in which he lost the popular vote. Four of nine current Supreme Court justices - Clarence Thomas, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett - were confirmed by a Senate majority that collectively won a minority of the popular vote in Senate elections and represented less than half of the American population.

Once appointed via this undemocratic process, federal judges serve for life, subject only to the near-impossible standard of impeachment. Lifetime appointments lead to judges who remain on the bench until they are literally on their deathbeds - more than 90% of district and circuit court judges die within a year of full retirement. Nor is impeachment a real threat: no SCOTUS justice has been successfully impeached, and only eight federal judges (out of thousands) have been removed from the bench.

While judicial review is not explicitly provided for in the constitution, SCOTUS granted itself the power to demand or reject government action, including legislation, as unconstitutional in its 1803 *Marbury v Madison* decision. This power is essentially unlimited: couched as authoritative interpretations of the constitution, SCOTUS's decisions are essentially beyond review except by subsequent iterations of the court itself (as explained below, amending the constitution to reverse a SCOTUS decision is essentially impossible).

Judicial review, within the context of the American system, renders SCOTUS, in essence, a college of bishops beyond democratic control, who can cite the 'holy scripture' (the constitution) to invalidate the will of the majority on any given issue. Their reasoning is obscure and beyond practical challenge: they work by interpreting pithy, often vague language passed to us by long-dead authors and robe themselves in an aura of timeless wisdom and erudition. SCOTUS has recently begun abandoning any pretense at accountability, increasingly deciding matters without so much as providing the reasoning supposedly informing the decisions, via the opaque 'shadow docket'.[3]

SCOTUS decisions have affected and prevented some of the most important changes in American history. The Lochner Era - as the jurisprudential era immediately preceding the New Deal is commonly known - illustrates this dynamic. Before the New Deal, and especially before the Civil War, the role of the federal government was extremely limited. During the Lochner Era,[4] the Supreme Court invalidated a series of laws passed by Congress to improve the lives of the working class. Starting with invalidating the US's first income tax, SCOTUS rejected both state and federal laws on issues such as limits on the hours of work in a day; prohibition on yellow-dog contracts (ie, requiring employees, as a condition of employment, to sign an agreement that they would not join a union); limits on child labor; a law exempting unions from anti-monopoly laws; minimum-wage legislation; and various anti-monopoly laws.

In recent years, the Supreme Court has issued many far-reaching and structurally impactful decisions that strike at the heart of the already-limited democratic aspects of American society and government. For example, in 2010, SCOTUS built on an earlier decision (Buckley v Valeo), which held that political donations constituted free speech, and issued the 'Citizens United' decision that invited essentially unlimited money into American elections. The $14 million spent by a single Zionist Political Action Committee to replace Jamaal Bowman with an empty suit is a direct result of this decision.

As expected before Citizens United, these decisions have facilitated an explosion in political spending by unaccountable and unidentified elites. In contrast to traditional political action committees (PACs), so-called 'super-PACs' can spend unlimited money, so long as it is not directly coordinated with a candidate's campaign. While super-PACs have to disclose their donors, many of those donations come from 'dark money groups', which are not required to disclose their donors. Thus, the donor could be identified as 'Americans for Ayn Rand Thought' and be funded by a single individual - say Elon Musk. The super-PAC would identify 'Americans for Ayn Rand Thought' in its disclosures, but the latter would not need to disclose its donors. Thus, we would have no idea where the supe-PAC's money actually came from.

Dark money

'Dark money' spending exploded in Citizens United's wake: from less than $5 million in 2006 to more than *$300* million in 2014. Between 2010 and 2018, super-PACs spent $2.9 *billion* on federal elections. The overwhelming majority of this money (78%) came from just 100 donors. There is simply no way for regular working people to compete with this level of spending.

This situation is about to get a lot worse - late last year, the Eighth Circuit invalidated the VRA's private right of action provision - stripping private parties of the power to bring suits under the VRA. Since 92% are private suits, the decision, which is almost certain to be upheld by SCOTUS, is devastating to the protection of voting rights under the VRA. Of course, SCOTUS intervenes in US elections in multiple ways, including choosing the president in the 2000 election, and is likely to do so again.

SCOTUS's bad decisions are not limited to the electoral realm. It also has a hideous record of infringing on union rights. In 2018, SCOTUS decided in 'Janus v AFSCME' that the agency fees public unions charge the workers they represent to fund what they do for them violate employees' 'free speech rights'. In other words, the decision allowed employees who benefit from the union's negotiating and litigating on their behalf to do so without paying for that work. While the union is legally required to provide these benefits to all employees in their bargaining units, regardless of whether those employees choose to join the union, Janus means that employees may now opt out of paying for these services, dealing a significant blow to union finances.

In 2023, SCOTUS exacerbated the situation facing unions in Glacier Northwest, deciding that employers can sue striking unions for the losses caused by strikes. In that case, the employer did so to recover costs associated with the value of concrete they produce being lost when workers went on strike, while their trucks were still spinning the concrete. Despite their taking reasonable steps to time the start of their strike so as to enable the employer to save the concrete, the employer wasn't able to save all of it and sued the union for the money lost. SCOTUS found in the employer's favor, providing a vague standard that may render all unions liable for all losses incurred by employers as a consequence of strikes. Given that the very purpose of a strike is to impose economic consequences for an employer's mistreatment of its employees, this decision clearly eviscerates the right to strike.

Things are about to get much worse. Through organizations like the Federalist Society, reactionaries are pushing to reverse the limited social progress that American society has witnessed over the past 50 years and to exacerbate the neoliberal trend toward reduced regulation of business and increasing inequality. SCOTUS has introduced flimsy rationales, such as the 'Major Questions' doctrine, to prevent regulatory agencies and other parts of the executive branch from implementing statutory law in anything but a literal manner. Given the unlikelihood of effecting significant change through Congressional legislation, this doctrine may suffice to render the federal government effectively non-functional.

As if all the above were not bad enough, there is essentially nothing that can be done about any of it. Our constitution is the most difficult to amend in the world. It provides two avenues for change, both of which are practically impossible. The first option is for two-thirds of the House and Senate to agree to an amendment, followed by ratification by three-fourths of the states - either by their legislatures or via constitutional conventions. The second option is for two-thirds of state legislatures to agree to an amendment, followed by ratification by three-fourths of the states. This three-fourths requirement means that any constitutional amendment can be vetoed by a group of 13 states. And remember that many of the states have similarly anti-democratic bicameral legislative bodies (gerrymandering is often worse at the state level, for example).

Of approximately 11,000 attempts to amend, only 27 have been successful - the most recent in 1992 (and that was the ratification of an amendment first introduced in 1789 that relates to Congressional salaries). Even that number is somewhat misleading, as the majority of the most significant amendments were passed in exceptional circumstances - the first 10 are the Bill of Rights, introduced effectively simultaneously with the constitution itself, and three more were passed in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, when the former confederate states were given no choice but to accede. Except for the 17th amendment, which provided for direct election of senators (who were originally selected by state legislatures), none of the other amendments have changed any of the constitution's structural provisions.

Failed highly popular amendments highlight just how unlikely meaningful change through the amendment process is. The electoral college has been wildly unpopular for decades. In 1969, the House voted 338-70 to introduce a constitutional amendment to abolish it. Southern states filibustered in the Senate to kill the bill, and we are stuck with the electoral college to this day.

The equal rights amendment, which proposes nothing more than the indisputable idea that citizens should have equal rights without regard to sex, has been pending since 1923. Over the course of the past 100 years, it has been ratified in 38 states (six of which subsequently revoked their ratification) and debated multiple times. Highlighting the overlapping absurdities of our system, multiple federal courts have even concluded that the deadline for ratification passed in 1979.

As mentioned earlier, one aspect of the constitution is beyond even this limited amendment provision: no state may be deprived of its equal representation in the Senate without its consent. This provision alone renders the constitution irredeemably anti-democratic. The Senate is a linchpin in the federal government: no bill may become law, no federal judge may be appointed and no treaty may be ratified without its assent. Under this constitution, residents of more populous states will never be fairly represented at the federal level. This means that the smaller, disproportionately white and conservative states will exercise disproportionate power over the federal government, dragging it unfairly in a conservative direction, exactly as intended.

Socialist strategy

Any realistic discussion of socialist strategy must account for the constitution's multiple anti-majoritarian veto points. Barring a sudden, major shift in favor of socialist policies in smaller, whiter states (and it is difficult to imagine such a shift occurring any time soon), no socialist legislative program is likely to be successful. Any such efforts will inevitably expend themselves before small-state resistance can be broken in the Senate. Even if socialists were somehow to seize control of the Senate, the upcoming strategically timed resignations of Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito and John Roberts will ensure a Republican majority on the Supreme Court for decades, granting reactionaries a veto over any socialist legislative program. If socialists actually want to build socialism in this country, their strategy must account for these realities.

Our government is celebrated as the genius of the 'founding fathers', who designed interlocking and interdependent branches into a system of checks and balances to ensure that no one branch could achieve dictatorial power. But this is a lie. The framers designed the constitution to obstruct the exercise of majoritarian rule, which they feared would result in the erosion of landholder privileges, deterioration of the racial caste system and redistribution of wealth. While the people may elect the House on broadly democratic lines, it can do nothing without the Senate's approval. If something offensive to elite interests should sneak past the Senate, the president can - and frequently does - veto it. If, by some miracle, such a bill evades presidential veto, the courts act as a final veto, which can be exercised whenever elites sufficiently dominate the Supreme Court.

In short, no policy sufficiently offensive to elite interest - eg, socialist demands - can be plausibly expected to survive in the current system. If we want to build a better society, socialists must take the revolutionary road toward a democratic constitution ●

This is an edited version of the article first published in the Marxist Unity Group journal, *Light & Air* (www.marxistunity.com/the-revolutionary-road-to-democracy)

Notes

1. pre-kindergarten: a voluntary, classroom-based early education program for children typically aged 4 to 5.
2. 'SCOTUS' is a common acronym for the Supreme Court of the United States.
3. Emergency rulings issued by SCOTUS.
4. Around 1900-1937, when SCOTUS routinely struck down state regulations.

IRAN



A 1980 depiction of the 12 imams: the hidden one is hidden at the back

A hidden supreme leader

Irrationalist belief in divination, spirit contact, haloes and jinn armies grows above. Below, living standards are falling and protests are reviving. **Yassamine Mather** looks at the two worlds that make up the Islamic Republic

Iran is entering a new and uncertain phase under its supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei. He succeeded his father, Ali Khamenei, in early March 2026, after his death in the US-Israeli airstrikes that opened the war on February 28. Eight months into his leadership, the Islamic Republic has survived the initial military assault, which Iranians now call the "40-day war". But basic questions remain unanswered: who actually exercises power, how far the influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has grown, and whether the regime can cope with a deepening economic and social crisis.

The most striking feature of Mojtaba Khamenei's leadership is that he is completely absent from public view. He was reportedly seriously injured in the strike that killed his father. Since his appointment there has been no independently verified public appearance, photograph, video or recording of his voice.

Iranian officials insist that he exercises authority. They say he regularly consults senior officials and approves major strategic decisions. President Masoud Pezeshkian has claimed he met with him for seven hours in August. His statements and orders are published through his official website rather than delivered in person. While the supreme leader is formally Iran's ultimate religious, political and military authority, his public absence leaves uncertain how much personal control he exercises and who acts in his name.

The official explanations for his absence vary. According to the government, Khamenei's image, voice and public appearances are questions of national security - in particular the risk that Israeli or American intelligence services could locate and target him.

However, there is also more unusual commentary. In April, Salar Velayatmadar, a Revolutionary Guards commander and member of parliament's National Security Committee, speaking at an event marking the anniversary of the IRGC's founding, claimed that religious scholars in Najaf, Qom and Mashhad had advised against publishing photographs or videos of the new leader. Security officials had accepted the advice, because enemies might use occult sciences to harm Mojtaba Khamenei through his image. He referred to alleged institutions in Israel that study supernatural practices. He also cited a Revolutionary Guards member present at the attack on Ali Khamenei's residence, who said Mojtaba had been reciting religious invocations when his father was pulled from the rubble and he himself suffered only minor injuries. That account contradicts other reports of serious injury. The episode is not an isolated oddity: as I will explain later, it follows a long pattern in the Islamic Republic's political culture.

According to Reuters, senior Revolutionary Guards figures played a decisive role in securing Mojtaba Khamenei's appointment, despite reservations among parts of the clerical establishment. His long-standing ties to the Guards made him acceptable to those determined to preserve continuity after his father's death.

The result appears to be a more collective and militarised way of making decisions. The Revolutionary Guards, the Supreme National Security Council (whose secretary is major general Mohsen Rezaei) and senior political figures all exercise considerable influence. The military chain of command is now visibly at the centre of the leader's activity. On November 1, Khamenei's reported 'meeting' with the armed forces was attended by heads of the armed forces, as well as the IRGC.

Unlike his father, who built personal authority over nearly four decades, Mojtaba has inherited a system in which the Revolutionary Guards may come to dominate strategic decisions. In the 'meeting' with the commanders of the armed forces, it is reported that he ordered them to respond to any enemy threat "immediately and without geographical limits". He also ordered the list of military targets to be updated, so that America's and Israel's "material and non-material" assets fall within range of Iranian forces. In the event of any new military or "terrorist" attack, he was quoted as saying, Iran itself would decide when and on what terms the conflict ends.

Supernatural

Meanwhile, memoirs attributed to Ali Khamenei, published after his death, describe his longstanding interest in *jafr* and *raml* - traditional forms of divination, based on letters, numbers and geometric patterns. As a young man in Mashhad, he studied esoteric writings, collected manuscripts and consulted practitioners. Although Khamenei eventually considered that mastering these 'sciences' was extremely difficult, he maintained that they possessed genuine value. His religious rulings permitted their study, as well as treatment by people claiming contact with spirits, provided Islamic law was respected.

Supernatural beliefs had become especially controversial during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. Following his 2005 UN speech, Ahmadinejad told cleric Abdullah Javadi Amoli that a companion had seen a halo of light around him. His supporter, Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, also portrayed his election victory as miraculous, recounting a dream in which the 'Hidden Imam' prayed for his success.

During the 2009 presidential campaign, Mehdi Karroubi challenged Ahmadinejad over the halo story, while Mir Hossein Mousavi rejected government by fortune-telling and palm-reading. Ahmadinejad denied the account, although Javadi Amoli's office confirmed the authenticity of their recorded conversation.

Conservative media subsequently accused Ahmadinejad's close adviser, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, of consulting mystics and using magic to influence the president. These allegations intensified during Ahmadinejad's 2011 confrontation with Khamenei over intelligence minister Heydar Moslehi. Conservatives labelled Mashaei's circle the "deviant current", while Mesbah Yazdi declared himself more than 90% convinced that Ahmadinejad had been bewitched.

Abbas Ghaffari, allegedly connected to presidential associates, was accused of summoning jinn and producing talismans. In 2012, he reportedly received eight years in prison and 99 lashes, although the formal charges concerned political, religious and morality offences rather than sorcery. Another associate, cleric Abbas Amirifar, was arrested over a film linking contemporary politicians to prophecies about the 'Hidden Imam'.

Ahmadinejad's administration rejected the allegations as politically motivated; he mocked the supposed magicians for failing to prevent their own arrests.

In 2017, Ahmadinejad's former deputy, Hamid Baghaei, said Revolutionary Guards interrogators had accused him of attempting to overthrow the state with a jinn army, although this was absent from his indictment.

In March 2020, Khamenei suggested that supernatural and human enemies might cooperate against Iran. Rumours about an Intelligence Ministry unit combating jinn were denied, but Khamenei's website republished an interview with scholar Ahmad Abedi, alleging that Israeli intelligence used supernatural methods.

In 2023, Digarban published an unverified recording attributed to an Intelligence Ministry official, who claimed that "satanic jinn" had influenced participants in the 2022 protests. Religious scholars had reportedly recommended Quranic recitations, calls to prayer and religious ceremonies to counter these forces, alongside removing satellite dishes supposedly facilitating their movement.

During Israel's 2024 attacks on Hezbollah, seminary teacher Mostafa Karami claimed that Israel employed jinn in intelligence operations. Commentator Ali-Akbar Raefipour similarly alleged that Mossad used jinn to read opponents' thoughts, while cleric Mojtaba Azizi suggested that supernatural forces might assist both Israel and Muslims.

Following the 12-day war of 2025, former government official Abdollah Ganji claimed that talismans bearing Jewish symbols had been discovered in Tehran. In May 2026, cleric Masoud Aali attributed Israel's killing of commander Ali Shadmani, who reportedly changed locations every 30 minutes, to sorcery and supernatural intervention rather than conventional intelligence capabilities. He also linked alleged Jewish occult practices to opposition to the Hidden Imam.

Qom scholar Mohammad-Taqi Fazel Meybodi dismissed these claims as unfounded superstition. They may also divert scrutiny from intelligence failures and infiltration.

In a December 2022 interview, Mohammad Sarafraz, former head of Iran's state broadcaster, claimed that Mojtaba Khamenei occasionally consulted individuals professing supernatural knowledge or an ability to predict the future, and that their advice sometimes influenced decisions.

Confrontation

But back to real life. The war that began on February 28 damaged Iran's military infrastructure, economy and leadership - without, of course, bringing down the Islamic Republic.

In recent days Donald Trump has said repeatedly that the Iran war will end "soon". He has also raised the possibility of a "limited Epic Fury operation" - a reference to the 40-day war - and said that the USA still needs to "take care of" several Iranian sites, naming the suspected underground nuclear complex known as Pickaxe Mountain. He had said there would be no new attack before the US midterm elections on November 3. Reports say Washington has warned Persian Gulf allies to prepare for a short, high-intensity conflict soon after. Israel's Ynet reported that Israel is preparing for another round straight after the midterms. Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu - now leading a caretaker government after his coalition lost its majority in the Israeli elections - has spoken of a "historic, one-time opportunity" to end "the threat from the Islamic Republic" and has repeatedly said the fall of Iran's government is near.

The confrontation has not been entirely frozen. On the night of November 2, a US fighter jet destroyed an IRGC surface-to-air missile launcher on Qeshm Island in the Strait of Hormuz. The US called it 'self-defence' after the IRGC fired at a US aircraft - the Guards claimed to have shot down an American MQ-9 drone. But a US official denied that the strike indicated a resumption of major combat. However, the *Wall Street Journal* has reported a series of limited, largely unannounced US strikes on Iran in recent weeks, while negotiations are continuing in Qatar.[1]

The war has also reopened debate over Iran's declared rejection of nuclear weapons. Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, told Iranian television that no new decision had been taken to change the country's nuclear doctrine, but that the Iranian nation "has demands":

> The debate is currently being raised that if war breaks out again, whether we want to maintain the same previous doctrine or not, but no new decision has been officially or governmentally made.
>
> The Iranian nation has demands. They are looking for logic. After all, they see that the enemy has struck all of our nuclear centres. Well, for what reason did they strike? We responded positively to all International Atomic Energy Agency inspections. They had cameras at all our sites. When people see this, their expectation of us is naturally: why do you want to continue this situation?[2]

A day earlier, Mohammad Javad Haj-Ali Akbari, Tehran's interim Friday prayer leader, had called from the pulpit for the doctrine to be revised. This, he said, "is not a hasty or emotional reaction, but stems from the awareness and historical experience of the Iranian nation in dealing with American breach of promises".

Rezaei also attacked Rafael Grossi, director general of the IAEA, calling him "a mercenary of the Zionist regime" and saying that "all our problems began during his time". Grossi's tenure coincided with the period after the US withdrew from the JCPOA nuclear deal. Iran answered the reinstated sanctions by raising its enrichment levels, enlarging its uranium stockpile and gradually scaling back its cooperation with IAEA monitoring.

Since the US and Israeli attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities, the IAEA says it can no longer fully monitor all aspects of the programme. Iran's foreign ministry has now ruled out sending enriched uranium abroad and says it is not yet discussing conditions for renewed inspections.

Before the latest war, several officials had said that Iran could develop nuclear weapons, but chose not to, citing Ali Khamenei's position. They included Kamal Kharrazi, head of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, who was later killed in an Israeli strike, and Mohammad Eslami, head of the Atomic Energy Organisation. About two decades ago, the former supreme leader declared the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons forbidden (*haram*). Officials submitted this to the UN as a "nuclear fatwa" and cited it whenever the nuclear file became critical.

Mojtaba Khamenei has not stated whether he upholds his father's nuclear fatwa, leaving a consequential question unresolved.

Doha and Islamabad, who brokered a June memorandum approved by Mojtaba Khamenei "despite reservations", are mediating in new negotiations. Last week *The New York Times* reported that US vice-president JD Vance has sent a letter, via the Qatari mediators, to Mohsen Rezaei. Vance proposes that US and Iranian officials meet soon and says he would personally lead the American side. Rezaei confirmed he had read it and said its tone was noticeably different from Trump's earlier correspondence. Foreign minister Abbas Araghchi called it a positive step, but warned that any attempt to sow division would be a mistake.

On November 2 president Pezeshkian told Iranian media that Mojtaba Khamenei has authorised the government to negotiate with the US. It was the clearest public statement yet that the talks might have the leader's backing. China and Russia have also called for a political solution and warn against renewed military action.

According to foreign ministry spokesman Esmaeil Baghaei, the basis for the talks is still Iran's seven-step plan, now condensed into a sequence that could be carried out within two days:

- The US ends its naval blockade of Iranian ports.
- Iran reopens the Strait of Hormuz.
- Washington grants a waiver on Iranian oil sales, restoring those of June.
- The US cancels the sanctions it has recently imposed.
- Other issues are addressed only after these steps.

Iran's wider demands also include:

- a reduction in the US military presence in the region;
- recognition of new Hormuz shipping routes designated by Iran and Oman;
- an end to the conflict on all fronts, including Israeli attacks on Lebanon.

Tehran says nuclear talks can begin only once it has verified that its conditions are met. It rejects any transfer of its highly enriched uranium abroad.

Despite the claims of progress in recent talks, Iranian officials reportedly consider another US attack more likely than a deal.

Iran entered the war with inflation, unemployment, sanctions, and energy and water shortages - the closure of Hormuz and the US blockade deepened the crisis. US officials believe, the longer the current blockade of Iran continues, the more likely it is that the regime will face large protests, this time challenging its survival, and subsequently accept US terms for a deal.

There is no doubt that the economic situation is dire. Iranian figures put headline point-to-point inflation in the range of 84%-89%. Food inflation is far higher. The Statistical Centre of Iran reported 128% food inflation in July. Prices of oils and fats rose by more than 260%, and dairy, eggs and meat by around 145%. The rial reached a record low of about 2.02 million to the US dollar in late August. It traded at around 1.75 million in December 2025 and about one million in March 2025. In other words, the currency has lost roughly half its value in 18 months.

Formal employment

Hundreds of thousands of people have reportedly left formal employment since the war began. Meanwhile, average monthly income is estimated at around $150. The official minimum wage for 2026-27 is worth less than $90 a month at market exchange rates, and the minimum pension about the same.

However, reliable national poverty statistics are scarce and politically sensitive. Estimates published in Iranian media even before the war put between 22% and 50% of the population below the poverty line - a sharp increase since 2022. Households are reported to spend around 70% of their income on food, while food prices have risen steeply in recent months.

Health costs make the situation worse. Prices of some medicines have risen by up to 400% amid shortages, and some treatments for chronic and serious illnesses have become several times more expensive. The importers of subsidised medical goods, meanwhile, are accused of pocketing the benefit of cheap foreign currency instead of passing it on to patients.

Fixed rial pensions, adjusted only annually, rapidly lose value to inflation. State borrowing, politically appointed fund managers and fewer contributors relative to retirees have left pension funds chronically underfunded. In February 2025, the government's response was to raise the effective retirement age and lengthen the contribution period. Workers will have to work longer before they can claim pensions that are worth less and less. By July 2026, pensioners were telling reporters that their monthly income no longer covered basic living costs.

"The embezzlement is in dollars, our pensions are in rials" - the slogan on placards used by retired workers in protests held last week in Kermanshah contrasts the wealth of politically connected elites with the inadequate incomes of workers and retirees. Their hardship reflects not only war and sanctions, but longstanding inequality and economic decline.

Retirees, mostly pensioners of the insurance institution, the Social Security Organisation, and of large state industries, have gathered almost every Sunday for years, in what has become known as the 'Protest Sundays' movement. Despite the Islamic Republic's years of disregard for their demands, and despite the war, the movement has kept a regular presence on the streets and broadened its demands. On October 18 pensioners protested outside Social Security headquarters in Tehran, as well as in Rasht, Shush and Haft Tappeh. In Tehran they chanted: "High prices, embezzlement - this is your economy." In Rasht, protestors vowed to stand together "until the death sentences are overturned", showing how far the movement has taken up the cause of political prisoners.

On November 1 pensioners protested again in at least six cities: Shush, Ahvaz, Kermanshah, Isfahan, Tehran and Rasht. In several places they were joined by teachers. The political significance of retirees in these protests is important. Many of them are, in fact, the generation that waged nationwide strikes that led to the overthrow of the shah's regime. In addition, unlike those in employment, they do not fear being made redundant for waging protests that are becoming increasingly political.

Shush: Pensioners gathered outside the labour office. Their demands were:

- pensions raised in line with the real cost of living;
- free healthcare and education;
- adequate housing;
- the right to strike;
- the freedom to form independent organisations.

Kermanshah: Pensioners demonstrated outside the provincial headquarters. The slogans were openly political:

'The embezzlement is in dollars, our pensions are in rials!'; 'Down with high prices, poverty, war and destruction!'; 'Imprisoned protestors must be freed!'; 'Imprisoned teachers must be freed!'; 'Imprisoned workers must be freed!'; 'Solidarity and unity to end oppression and tyranny!'; 'Poverty, corruption and inflation are destroying people's lives!'; 'From France to Iran, the people are out on the streets!'

Ahvaz: Pensioners 'Enough of warmongering, our tables are empty!' Their protest directly connected military escalation with the cost of living.

Isfahan: Retired steel and foundry workers marched to the provincial governor's office to demand full payment of delayed pensions and the healthcare and other benefits they are legally owed. Their slogans were aimed at the clerical establishment and the president: "Hussein, Hussein is their slogan; lies and theft are their trade" and "Hey, president, you lied to the nation". They also rejected the official claim that America alone is to blame for their situation.

Tehran: Pensioners demanded an annual bonus equal to two months' pension and criticised the supplementary health insurers. 'Neither cold nor heat can stop us!', they chanted, and 'Free education is our indisputable right!'

Rasht: Retirees and teachers held a joint rally against wages below the poverty line and against the government's failure to carry out the pay adjustments required by law.

Pension funds were built by generations of workers, yet retirees have no direct oversight or say in how their money is managed and invested. Instead, state-appointed managers direct these assets - historically using them to fund government loans, enrich political insiders and settle state debts. Meanwhile, pensioners are forced into weekly protests just to claim their basic rights and guaranteed benefits. Demands for transparency, state compliance and elected retiree representatives on governing boards stem directly from this fundamental contradiction.

The authorities have continued to suppress dissent alongside all of this. The mass protests of December 2025 and January 2026 were met with deadly force. Thousands more arrests have been reported since the war began, and executions on national-security charges have increased. Detained protestors, teachers and labour activists remain in prison, and some face death sentences.

Political alternative

'Solidarity and unity to end oppression and tyranny!' points to the challenge of fragmentation among workers, retirees, teachers, nurses, students and women's movements. Shared concerns over declining wages, public services and repression create grounds for cooperation; joint rallies in Rasht show this beginning.

The slogan 'From France to Iran, the people are out on the streets!' also shows that protestors are aware of the international dimension of these struggles. People in many countries are resisting austerity, attacks on workers' rights and rising military spending. Learning from those experiences and building solidarity between movements can strengthen independent organisation and collective struggle.

The persistence of the weekly 'Protest Sundays' demonstrations - sustained through local gatherings, informal networks and communication between activists - demonstrates both the determination of retirees and the depth of their grievances. Yet the movement's geographical fragmentation and limited organisational coordination continue to restrict its political leverage. Stronger links between cities, more durable forms of organisation and closer cooperation with workers, teachers, nurses and other sections of the working class could help transform these dispersed protests into a more coherent, nationwide movement.

The revolutionary left could, in principle, play an important role in bringing these struggles together around a common programme for fundamental social and political change. However, this would require more than expressions of solidarity with individual protests. It would mean developing organisational links between different sectors of the working class, connecting immediate economic demands to the broader struggle against exploitation and political repression, and raising the question of political power and what might replace the existing order.

Yet there is little evidence at present of a revolutionary left with the organisational strength, social roots or political coherence necessary to fulfil such a role. The gap between the potential of these struggles and the absence of a credible, organised, socialist alternative remains a central weakness.

What does all this mean for the future of the Islamic Republic?

The central question is not simply whether it can survive the present crisis, but what kind of political order is taking shape around the mysterious Mojtaba Khamenei and the increasingly prominent military and security establishment. The growing influence of these institutions raises the possibility of a system in which the formal structures of clerical rule remain in place, while effective power becomes even more concentrated in the hands of the security apparatus. At the same time, Qatar-mediated negotiations, the threat of renewed military confrontation and continuing economic pressures place additional strains on the leadership and its ability to maintain internal cohesion. The persistence of the retirees' protests, despite repression, economic hardship and political uncertainty, exposes the limits of a strategy based primarily on coercion and military survival.

Even if the Islamic Republic succeeds in preserving its state institutions and security structures, this would not resolve the underlying contradictions of declining living standards, deepening inequality and widespread social discontent. The crucial distinction, therefore, is between the survival of the regime and its ability to restore political legitimacy and social stability. These are not the same thing ●

Notes

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ART

Bertolt Brecht and Holy Joy

Culture can bring together theatre, poetry, music, stand-up comedy, anthropology and communist politics. That, explains **Tam Dean Burn**, is the ambition of the Diderot Gesellschaft Movement

Two events happening in London this week bring the opportunity to take forward plans for our communist cultural front, the Diderot Gesellschaft Movement (DGM). Running from November 5-8 at SOAS and Birkbeck University, is Historical Materialism's 2026 conference - 'Planetary warscapes ablaze: imperialist mutations in infernal times'. It will feature a session on November 8 led by Esther Leslie and myself, under the heading, 'Ideas for a manifesto for a renewed Diderot Gesellschaft'.

Readers may be aware of how we have developed this DGM project in both the 2025 and 2026 Communist Universities, followed by articles on both, published in the *Weekly Worker*.[1] On such foundation we wrote this introduction for our Historical Materialism session:

> The Diderot Gesellschaft was a proposition by Bertolt Brecht in 1937. Drawing together materialist intellectuals and practitioners across Europe, its aim was to refashion cultural production as a critical tool on the basis of encyclopaedism, rather than specialisms; collaboration, not individual artists; experiment, not convention; and the insights of social inquiry and materialist stances. This panel argues that the moment has arrived to reanimate this aborted project.
>
> The session will present the original idea, explain its contemporary relevance and potential and draw up elements of a manifesto together with participants. As a reference point there will be the recent work of Darko Suvin on Brecht, including his versification of the *Communist manifesto*, revolutionary song, ecology, Prometheus and speculative fiction. There will be presentations and discussion, as well as performance elements.

That *Communist manifesto* versification was another of Brecht's projects which did not come to fruition, although he worked on it from 1945 until his death in 1956. Comrade Darko describes it thus in the introduction to the published text:

> In early 1945, most probably already in January, Brecht started working on what he at some point called a "versification of the *Communist manifesto*", but at other points also thought of it as part of a vaster project, a *Lehrgedicht* parallel to Lucretius's 'On the nature of things'. The title of that "didactic poem" or "poem for learning" was not yet fixed, but could have been something like 'On the nature of people' or, more precisely, 'On the unnatural character of bourgeois relationships'.
>
> The time slot for this venture of Brecht's in Santa Monica was found by a hiatus in co-translating his play, *Life of Galileo*, with Charles Laughton: Laughton had to play in the pirate movie, *Captain Kidd*, in order to redeem time for that translation-cum-adaptation, which eventually resulted in his playing *Galileo* in Los Angeles. But the deeper impulse for Brecht was the overwhelming approach of an end to World War II that put on the agenda the future of Germany; for emigres of Brecht's stripe this meant: will it be socialist or not?



Esther Leslie and Tam Dean Burn: plans

During his intense concentration on what turned out to be not only a versification but also a reworking of Marx's *Manifesto* … Brecht noted in his diary on March 10 1945: "Between the 'didactic poem' and the terrible newspaper reports from Germany - ruins and no sign of life from the workers." Pondering on how to rediscover for German workers the obviously forgotten teachings of Marxism, Brecht concluded that "it seems to me possible to renew the propagandistic efficacy [of the *Communist manifesto*] today, one hundred years later, and to lend it new, fortified (*bewaffnet*) authority, by sublating its pamphlet character".[2]

Brecht was keen to place the ideas of Marx and Engels in the context of world wars and the cyclical nature of spiralling capitalist crises:

> The great truth of our epoch (which is not enough, but without which no other pertinent truth can be found) is that our continent is sinking into barbarism, because violence is used to cling to the existing relations of property over the means of production ... We cannot search out the truth about the barbaric conditions without thinking about those who suffer under them and, while we, continually sloughing off temptations of cowardice, search for the true relationships because of those who are ready to use such cognitions, we have at the same time to think about presenting the truth in such a way that it could be a weapon in their hands, and also so slyly that this presentation may not be found out and cut off by the enemy.

Whole poem

At each of those CU programmes, I performed sections of the poem before sessions each morning, starting with this first stanza invoking the epoch:

> Wars are destroying the world,
> and the ruins are visibly haunted
> By an enormous spectre,
> not simply born of war.
> In peace it could already be
> sighted, terror to the rulers
> But friend to the children of slums.
> In scanty kitchens
> Often it peeps, horrified, angry,
> into the half-empty pots.
> Often it waits for the exhausted
> in front of shipyards and mines;
> It visits friends in jails,
> passing without passport.
> Even in offices it may be seen
> and in lecture-rooms
> Heard. At times it dons a hat of
> steel, enters
> Huge tanks & flies with deadly
> bombers. It speaks in many
> Tongues, in all of them. And in
> many it holds its tongue.
> It sits as a guest of honour in
> hovels, a headache of villas,
> It has come to change all things
> and stay forever, its name is …
> Communism.

Now for the first time ever there will be a performance of the whole poem (written in hexameters, as inspired by Lucretius) as translated and adapted by Darko Suvin. It will be hosted by another ongoing DGM partnership - the legendary music group spanning almost four decades, Band of Holy Joy. This will be performed on their Resonance radio show, 'Bad Punk',[3] to a soundtrack created live in the studio, featuring Stuart Wilding of the Lo-Fi Improvised Music Workshop and Skye McDade-Burn on clarinet.

This will broadcast live 10pm-11.30pm on Friday November 6 and will include excerpts of works by Brecht's longtime musical partner and comrade, Hanns Eisler. This will reflect the poignancy that, as Darko points out, "Discouraged by his best friends, such as Eisler and Feuchtwanger, engaged in many other pressing writings, and above all unsure of who would be the poem's readers, Brecht broke off its composition in the second half (probably in September) of 1945. He cherished the project until the end of his life."

Eisler was later to deeply regret his actions, stating in an interview:

> Well, and here comes a big slice of self-criticism, I took a far too practical view. I thought: 'What baggage do we bring back with us when we return to our destroyed Germany? What can we rebuild it with? We won't achieve a lot with the *Manifesto* in hexameters.' Today, in 1961, I regret having discouraged a great master like Brecht from this project rather than having encouraged him. Don't get me wrong: if Brecht wanted to do something, nobody could restrain him - nobody, regardless of who or what he was. So I wasn't really the one who held him back. But if, in the isolation of the emigration, a man hears every day from his best friends, 'What on earth are you doing? And anyway, the hexameters are wrong!', after a few weeks, he'll simply lose his enthusiasm.
>
> Both Feuchtwanger and I discouraged him, and we were both completely in the wrong. We had completely forgotten that Marxism and the struggle of the working class take place to varying extents, and in many different ways and arenas, regardless of any considerations of practicability. Were we to have the *Communist manifesto* in epic form by Brecht, it would have gone down in history as a unique work of art - it would have been magnificent for the finest literary minds to have had access to it.[4]

This by his other culpable comrade, written after his death, has similar sentiments:

> This most rich poet scattered into all he created seeds of thought, destined to spring into full life only later. He was persuaded that any living work grows and works on by immanent force, that it changes with each listener and reader reached. His poems are based on this presupposition, and only the future shall make visible the full width and plenitude of his work.[5]

But, of course, Brecht was not able to foresee the other great crisis facing humanity - the looming, temperature-rising climate catastrophe. Darko and I have discussed this and how it fits with Brecht's inspiration for Lucretius's extended poem, 'On the nature of things'.

So, as a counterpoint to the *Manifesto*, Esther Leslie will present some of the ecological work of Rosa Luxemburg on our broadcast and outline how Brecht was inspired by the possibilities for the medium of radio. His call for it to be a two-way means of communication has only really become possible with recent technology and is part of our plans for experimenting with the Substack platform.

At our Sunday Historical Materialism session we will highlight both aspects of Brecht's work and go deeper into the ideas of the *Manifesto* with attendees.

Another wonderful element that has since come to the fore and now features strongly in the possibilities going forward is what was recently highlighted at an Online Communist Forum: the forthcoming launch of the path-breaking book by Chris Knight and Jerome Lewis, *The revolutionary origins of language*.[6]

The Radical Anthropology Group has organised a day school - both in-person and on zoom - on Tuesday November 10 under the title, 'What made us "hunter-gatherers of words"' with several RAG and other speakers.[7]

The discoveries that express the revolutionary theory in the book are so rooted in the origins of human ritual and culture that the possibilities for performance are enormous and something that DGM will be focussing on in the coming months.

Language

For example, as the book states at the opening of chapter 3,

> "All the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people. Without hearing this chorus we cannot understand the drama as a whole" (Mikhail Bakhtin).
>
> Few would deny that humans feel healthiest and happiest when relaxing among equals, taking orders from no-one, free to play, joke and laugh. Language flourishes best under conditions of this kind. For our conversations to come alive, we need freedom to express our thoughts in ways not literally true, to allow a gap between what we say and what we actually intend our words to mean. Wherever our evolutionary ancestors lacked such freedom, it is unlikely that language as we know it could have come into being.
>
> When we look at what happens among egalitarian hunter-gatherers today, we find the most favourable conditions imaginable for language to flourish. Social scientists in the west often picture egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies as deficient - no property, no authority figures, no status differentials and, in short, no 'social complexity'. Hunter-gatherer societies are said to be 'simple'. So, to many, it comes as a surprise to discover the subtle and complex strategies used by hunter-gatherers to maintain what to them is the most precious thing - their right to personal autonomy, including the right to resist harassment or abuse. Key among these strategies is the use of humour to prevent people from throwing their weight around.

So a stand-up comedy show immediately appears to fit so well as a potential performance format and that is something we will be exploring. Such possibilities of working with social scientists like the RAG alongside a radical comedian like Mark Thomas is exactly the sort of thing the DGM is looking towards right now, whilst also developing our international connections with such eminent Marxist academics as Darko Suvin - and hopefully those of like mind at Historical Materialism 2026 and the RAG day school ●

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ECONOMY

The great AI swindle

Caught between faltering returns and lower-priced competition from China's state-directed tech industry, the east Asian AI bubble is bursting. How will this affect the US? The big test will be the public launch of Anthropic, writes **Michael Roberts**

Things have gone from bad to worse for Asian artificial intelligence companies. It all started in South Korea with the Korea Composite Stock Price Index (KOSPI) plunging over 8% on October 15. That just added to a huge fall in the Korean index of 41% from a peak of the Korean AI investment boom last June. The share prices of the two large Korean tech companies, SK Hynix and the mega Samsung Electronics, fell over 10% on that one day.

Now the bursting of the bubble has spread to China. The STAR50 stock index, tracking key AI and chip firms, has dropped 40% since its July high, while the broader CSI 300 entered bear market territory after a 20% fall from June. When placed alongside Seoul's $900 billion seven-day wipeout on October 15, nearly $1.4 trillion in 'fictitious capital' has been vaporised across the east-Asian hardware supply chain in October alone. By 'fictitious capital', Marx meant the market value of stocks and bonds, which are claims on the value of real assets like the machinery, software and components that companies have. It is fictitious because it can well end way out of line with the real value of assets owned and employed by companies to make profits.

In Asia, it has been retail investors (that is, households) which have been pitching into the stock market. Household savings rates are high, especially in China, and the previous investor boom in Chinese real estate collapsed years ago. Buying AI stock has been the latest craze to make a fortune. But now it seems that investors have decided that the price of investment in AI-driven Asian companies is well over the top.

SK Hynix and Samsung are the key companies that supply the semiconductor chips required to run advanced AI accelerators and data centres. For the past two years, they appeared to be making huge profits on chip sales - exploiting the extreme global demand for chips from cash-rich US tech monopolies that badly needed more server memory for their AI projects. But these super-profits now appear in jeopardy, especially after China's CXMT unveiled a data centre server memory dramatically reducing the cost of chips. Korean stock market investors saw the writing on the wall - no more super-profits.

CXMT's break into the Korean share of the chip market doubled its dynamic random-access memory (DRAM) global market share from 4% to 10% year-on-year in the second quarter of 2026. But that had its own consequences for the Chinese stock market. Chinese and Asian AI labs have shifted towards so-called 'open-weight' models (free to use). Falling chip costs have also meant falling prices for AI companies in China, where the competition has been intense. Capital had flooded so much into chip design, memory and robotics that profit margins are disappearing.

So China's speculative investors have got worried and CXMT itself has lost more than 25% of its stock market value. According to Goldman Sachs, AI-related stocks had swollen to 42% of China's total equity market capitalisation and 57% of total trading turnover across China mainland A-shares and Hong Kong H-shares. Even after losing 40.4% of its value, the STAR 50 still trades at roughly 100 times trailing earnings (down from nearly 250x at its June/July peak) - more than triple the US Nasdaq tech stock index.



Will it burst in America too?

As commentator Saad Zaidi explained, China's rapid horizontal replication of AI hardware capacity has compressed profit margins across the entire east Asian supply chain, with loss of pricing power amid overcapacity. Caught in a pincer movement between faltering returns on downstream AI capital expenditure on one side, and China's state-directed tech industry lowering profit margins on the other, the speculative bubble in east Asian hardware is visibly fracturing.

As Zaidi says, this follows Marx's law of profitability: namely, that any rapid rise in investment in technology will eventually weigh down profitability, unless it drastically raises the productivity of living labour across the wider economy. And so far, as I have previously pointed out,[1] total factor productivity (economic gains from AI innovation) have hardly risen. As Zaidi states, "The market is now waking up to the reality that upstream hardware valuations cannot stay detached from downstream profitability forever."

As I have shown before,[2] this AI mania mirrors that of the 19th century investment in burgeoning railway technology. Then railways were also seen as a powerful new technology that could transform transport and travel, and so boost productivity. This led to massive speculation in railway shares, as company after company launched new rail lines across Britain during the 1840s and in the US in the 1870s. Eventually, investor concerns about overcapacity rail projects, along with increasing distrust of railroad securities, triggered crashes.

In the UK, the mania reached its zenith in the 1840s. Marx noted then that "in the railway swindle from summer 1844, railway investors apparently expected much higher than the average profit rate".[3] Marx called it the 'great railway swindle' to emphasise that the claims made by the railway companies for huge profits to be made were deliberately overstated (shades of US AI companies now). Investors naively poured capital into schemes that were significantly less profitable than they expected and rail company directors had promised.

The question now is whether investor fears about overinvestment and declining prospects for profits from AI will spread to the heart of the AI mania: the USA. Competition from China's free or very cheap-to-use and ever-improving AI models is eating into the potential profits of the US AI labs, OpenAI and Anthropic. All top five most popular models are now Chinese and, according to a *Wall Street Journal* report published last week, "approximately 45% of all tracked tokens now flow through Chinese models".[4]

As Torsten Slok at Apollo Capital has pointed out, despite massive investments and widespread hype around artificial intelligence, the technology has delivered zero financial payoff to corporate America outside of tech: "The bottom line is that the AI story will be decided in the [remaining 493 companies in the S&P 500 stock market index], not the ['Magnificent Seven'], and so far, there is no evidence that revenue growth or margins are improving outside the tech sector."[5]

And the profitability of the mega hyperscalers that are driving AI investment has been falling: in return for over a trillion dollars of capital expenditure they have seen their return on invested capital drop on a quarterly basis.

And there are signs that the US AI investor bubble may be leaking. Last week, the Alphabet (Google) share price fell 10% after it boosted its AI spending to more than $50 billion in the third quarter, leading to a record 'cash burn' that spooked investors. Free cash flow (ie, money available to invest) fell to minus $9.1 billion in September compared to minus $5.9 billion in the prior quarter. To back its spending spree, Alphabet has taken on tens of billions in debt and in June announced plans to raise about $85 billion in its first share sale in more than two decades - a sharp reversal after years of buying back its own shares.

But the big test is coming: the US AI company Anthropic is about to release shares to the public in order to raise $150 billion, making the company's market value equivalent to $1.5 trillion - a truly staggering market value for a company that makes no profit yet. As Anthropic put it in the prospectus to potential shareholders,

> We are at an early stage of our revenue growth, we have experienced rapid growth in recent periods, and our historical growth rates are not indicative of future performance or our ability to sustain or forecast future revenue growth. We do not expect our revenue will continue to grow at comparable rates, and we cannot assure you that it will continue to grow at all.[6]

It is one big bet! ●

Michael Roberts blogs at thenextrecession.wordpress.com

Notes

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What we fight for

- Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.
- There exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.
- Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members should have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.
- Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question - ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.
- Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'.
- The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.
- Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.
- Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.
- The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote.
- We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.
- Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.
- Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.
- Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.
- Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

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weekly worker

Furedi and his sheeple have gone far right

A long old road

Nigel with pet dog, Nigel posing as Kitchener, Nigel solving the pothole crisis. Edited by ex-leftist Mick Hume, Reform UK's new paper has been launched. **Paul Demarty** reads it, so you don't have to

The rustling of paper at my front door the other day turned out to be an unexpected gift: the first issue of *The Reformer*, the house journal of Nigel Farage's Reform UK.

"Free for patriots", as the front page tells us (how much we non-patriots are supposed to pay for this is unclear), it is a rather airy confection. Reading it cover to cover took me about six minutes, which at least is probably longer than Richard Tice can keep going in bed. On the front is a picture of Nigel, beaming as he pets his dog (or at least one assumes it is his). On the back is another headshot of the great helmsman pointing his finger at us, as in the classic World War I poster ('Britain needs YOU!'). Indeed, seven of its eight A4 pages feature snaps of Nigel (I'm cheating a bit, because one photo spills over the centrefold on pages 4 and 5, but still).

Dare we imagine that, in posing for his Kitchener tribute, Nigel was in fact pointing at a mirror? Britain seems not to need *you*, but rather *him*. Only he can fix it - the 'broken Britain' we hear so much about. This is hardly surprising: after all, Reform is not strictly a party, but a company (owned by Farage!). His political outfits have always been characterised by the 'one man band' aspect and, when he lands a 'big beast' recruit, it is rarely long before there is a split. His poaching of various recent Tory ministers has not panned out that way yet, perhaps because they are all too shop-soiled to challenge him, but there has already been a damaging split with Rupert Lowe, who went on to found the even fruitier Restore Britain.



Six minutes is all it takes

Fakery

In any case, the paper seems to be a kind of direct-address system from Nigel (or his ghostwriters at least) to his adoring public. The overall package does not exactly have a very insurgent feel to it. It resembles nothing so much as the fake local papers put about by all parties at election time. A dodgy chart appears, claiming that only Reform can beat Labour (straight out of the Liberal Democrat playbook), as does a lot of material about a "pothole emergency" in Essex, which gets almost as much space as 'stop the boats' rants.

'Broken Britain' has been an invincible cliché of British politics at least as far back as David Cameron's Tory leadership. It sums up so much of the intellectual and political poverty of the modern far right, in Britain and elsewhere: a formless, indistinct mass of grievances and anxieties, some real and some wholly factitious, for which direct blame is assigned to immigrants, lefties and the political elite. Responsibility for cleaning all this up rarely goes to a real outsider, but a supposedly disloyal insider - be it the celebrity businessman Donald Trump, the financier Farage, the fringe congressman Jair Bolsonaro (or, more recently, his flagrantly corrupt progeny). It is striking that even the lies of these men are taken somehow as proof of their authenticity, but it is an essential part of the package - proof that they are prepared to fight dirty.

Everything is fake here - the 'authentic' lies; the 'patriotism' of men who are plainly agents of foreign capitalists, specifically American; the staggeringly dishonest official optimism. *The Reformer* hails the recent Clacton by-election as a great victory over "the political establishment", rather than a farcical victory over a man dressed as a bin. It trumpets the successes of Reform's councillors, ignoring the predictable general chaos that has been the more abiding story of their municipal conquests. The real 'pothole emergency' is in the brain tissue of anyone who would believe any of this for a second.

Can there be a second issue of this preposterous production? What more would it be able to say? All its content targets elections years from now (though perhaps Andy Burnham fancies an early one). The quip of John Sullivan springs to mind about a plan to turn the Trotskyist *Militant* weekly into a daily: "really it would be better as an annual". *The Guardian* notes a job advert that implies somewhat grander ambitions: "Reform UK is building a seven-day digital newsroom at its Westminster headquarters and is looking for hard-working, NCTJ-qualified multimedia reporter/producers who can report, write and publish high-quality content at speed." If this comes to anything, we expect it will be the fraudulent 'citizen journalism' so beloved of the American right, but we will see.

All of that will be up to a certain Mick Hume, whom old hands on the left will know once edited a rather different journal by the name of *Living Marxism*. Yes, this dismal freesheet is somehow yet another way-station on the long political and intellectual decline of what once called itself the Revolutionary Communist Party, but since the late 1990s has been more or less a rightwing clique best known for its publication of the website, *Spiked*.

Alphabet soup

The story, as briefly as possible (I ask for patience during the following course of alphabet soup): the RCP originated in the mid-1970s in a series of splits from the International Socialists, forerunners of today's Socialist Workers Party. The first split produced the Revolutionary Communist Group, but this almost immediately split again, when the core leaders around David Yaffe adopted a third-worldist, strongly 'campist' outlook.

A group around Frank Furedi decamped to form the Revolutionary Communist Tendency, whose theorisation of the Soviet Union and satellites was essentially the extremely critical analysis of Hillel Ticktin with the serial numbers filed off, and - as the 1970s gave way to the 1980s - became known for their extreme contrarianism with respect to the 'default' positions on the left. They were in favour of nuclear power at the very lowest ebb of its popularity. They held very strong positions in favour of Irish republicanism which - though salutary, given the British left's general cowardice on the question - frequently spilled over into irresponsible provocations.

Their members, Don Milligan and Michael Fitzpatrick, bizarrely denounced government attempts to manage the spread of HIV/Aids. Most notoriously among the wider left, they insisted, all the way through the 1984-85 miners' strike, on the need for a ballot - arguably a legitimate tactical question at the outset, but essentially an echo of government propaganda thereafter. More examples could be mentioned.

The RCT became the RCP in 1981, having taken the view that the Labour Party was moribund and that a new party - committed to sufficiently spiky and provocative positions in general politics, one assumes - was well placed to overtake it in the short term. Yet contrarianism was, with them, a terminal condition: they became addicted to the blood of sacred cows. After the fall of the Soviet bloc, the RCP took the view that class consciousness was buried for perhaps a generation, and the need was to rebuild the idea of political agency as such. The enemies now were not so much the right, but the liberal left, whose fussiness about climate change (a hoax, in their view) and political correctness formed a kind of iron cage around the human spirit of innovation and adventure.

The RCP as such receded from view, to be formally wound up some time in the mid-1990s; its magazine, *Living Marxism*, was rebranded more ambiguously as *LM* - Hume was the editor at this time. Its political line effectively echoed pro-capitalist libertarianism in all respects, since for it the key thing was human achievement and the defeat of anti-growth, misanthropic enemies like the green movement. The RCP maintained its eccentric foreign policy positions for a time, taking an extreme pro-Serb line during the Yugoslav wars, which eventually destroyed *LM* when it was sued for publishing an article claiming that ITN footage of war crimes was staged.

From the ashes of *LM* came forth *Spiked*. But that was only one of the many fronts of this odd clique, which also included the Institute of Ideas, Sense About Science and many others. (Not for nothing did our own Mark Fischer long ago nickname them "the SWP with hair gel".) In this capacity, they began to hoover up corporate sponsorships and the like. The old anti-imperialist shibboleths began to atrophy, until, in 2009, with the chaos of Operation Cast Lead raging, they switched teams on Israel/Palestine, becoming fanatical Zionists.

Occultism

Retrospectively, it is clear that this began a transition from right-libertarianism to pure, culture-war, far-right nationalism. *Spiked* and the rest were gung-ho for Brexit, enthusiastic promoters of the trans panic, and apocalyptic critics of all forms of 'wokery'. The tie-up with Farage dates back at least to 2019, when several ex-RCP people appeared on Brexit Party electoral lists in the European parliament elections. Furedi, having long been a sociologist at the University of Kent, showed up in a senior role at the Mathias Corvinus Collegium's Brussels office - essentially a soft-power operation of Viktor Orbán's regime. (He has recently resigned, claiming that cuts under the new government have made it impossible to continue.)

There are many theories out there about how all this happened. A popular one is that the whole thing was a state op - these were provocateurs in the strict sense. I do not think that can be ruled out, but it seems unlikely. (Why would the British state be contributing to Hungarian national ambitions via MCC Brussels?) Frankly, very many people go from youthful leftism to conservatism on an individual basis, partly because the left can be maddening. Why should a collective with a strong sense of loyalty to the founder-leader not walk the same road as Malcolm Muggeridge or Peter Hitchens?

In any case, some vestigial commitment to their particular condensation of the Marxist canon survived for a surprisingly long time, and may still do. (I was surprised, upon meeting their then-recent recruit, Philip Cunliffe, in 2012 or so, that he could quote Hillel Ticktin verbatim in conversation with some orthodox Trotskyists - clearly still on a reading list somewhere.) Yet with the post-Soviet turn, the RCP's Marxism departed from even a notional push-and-pull with the workers' movement, as it really was. Such 'Marxism', separated from an orientation to substantive class politics, ceases to be anything particularly special. Instead, it tends to degrade into an occultist historicism - essentially isomorphic with reactionary equivalents like the theories of Oswald Spengler, Rudolf Steiner and so forth (a problem that also afflicts similar outfits like Platypus).

For the occult historicist, the concrete substantive question is uninteresting, except inasmuch as it bears on the true motive forces in history, which abstractly stand over us (the cycle of ages, the progress of freedom, or whatever). This leads to a cavalier attitude to truth: an article is about giving history a little push. This in turn tends to degrade the intellectual level.

At the end of this process - I say that, but it is always possible to sink lower - lies something like the *Reformer*, eight squalid pages of purely instrumental, staggeringly dishonest political slop. What would the Mick Hume of the 1980s - always out-lefting the left, cheering on the Provos - say if he could see himself now? It is a long old road from Free Derry to the great Essex pothole emergency of 2025!

But that is between him and his conscience ●

paul.demarty@weeklyworker.co.uk