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“We have to protect ourselves with respect to China, Russia, and even the United States of America . . . We will not protect the Europeans unless we decide to have a true European army.”—
Emmanuel Macron,
president of France
(6 November 2018).

Debt crisis grows

Global debt is now becoming a major factor in the instability of the system of capitalism. Figures show that in the second quarter of 2018 global debt reached a new record, rising to \$260,000 billion.

Of this total, 61 per cent — \$160 trillion — is private debt of the non-financial sector, while 23 per cent is government debt.

Eugene McCartan reports P2

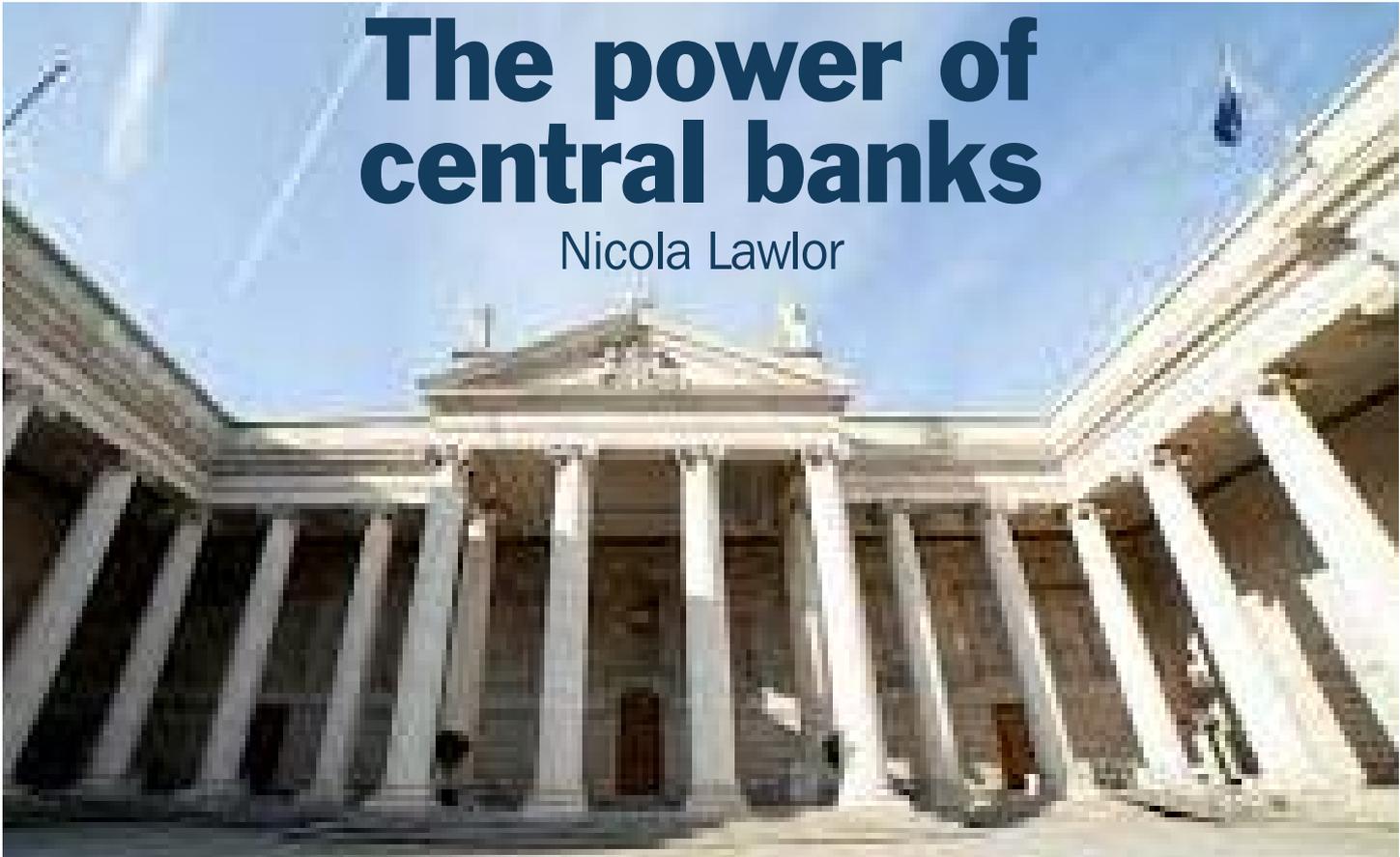
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The power of central banks

Nicola Lawlor

THE DOMINANT Ideological story of central banks is that removing them from the control of governments depoliticised them and made them neutral, “scientific” actors in the economy.

The argument goes that, as

economics developed into a science, with the primary aim of keeping inflation low, making central banks independent allowed them to act unhindered by the short-term electoral sways of party politics and government. This facilitates them in acting in the long-term interest of

the economy. This view argues that they are beyond political influence; they are beyond ideology.

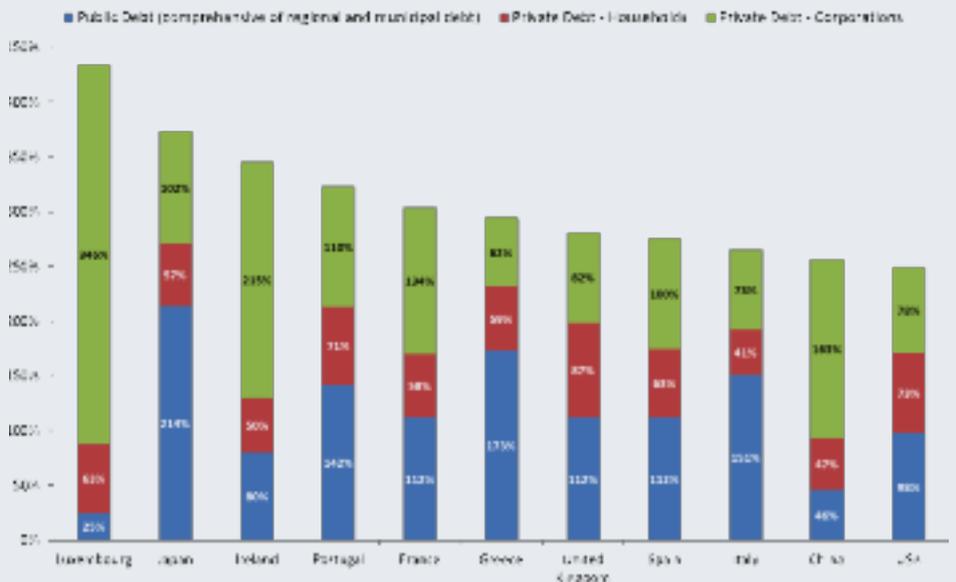
This could not be further from the truth.

Central banks are deeply ideological and political institutions that have been

Debt crisis crowds

CONTINUED When attempting to assess the debt we need to take into account the ratio of the debt to GDP; this has passed the 320 per cent threshold for the first time (see chart).

The United States alone is responsible for 30 per cent of the outstanding public debt. Trump’s policies in the last two years have accelerated the growth in US government debt. The US Treasury is followed by the Japanese and Chinese debt agencies and the biggest euro-zone economies.



Global debt (percentage of GDP), 2017

Source: Bank for International Settlements



‘Far from being neutral, “scientific,” or independent, central banks work hand in hand with finance capital, representing its interests and interfering in democratic debate on its behalf’

removed from democratic accountability and control and now, more firmly than ever, represent the interests of finance capital.

There are not many studies into the political operations of central banks and how they influence, and who they represent; but two papers looking at the EU Central Bank and this issue are worth reviewing.

The two papers are “Death by a thousand cuts? Financial political power and the case of the European financial transaction tax” and “Central banking and financial political power: An investigation into the ECB” by Manolis Kalaitzake of UCD. Both tackle head-on the role of European central banks and their relationship with finance capital.

In “Death by a thousand cuts,” Kalaitzake takes the case of the financial transaction tax and looks at how, and why, the ECB virtually killed this proposal.

The FTT had the support of leading member-states in the European Union, the EU Commission, the EU Parliament, and a majority of people in Europe, according to most research and opinion polls. Yet it hasn’t come about. And the writer demonstrates that one of the main reasons is the political mobilisation of financial actors, including, crucially, the ECB itself.

More generally, deep financial reform has not materialised following the crisis;

and in large part this is because of the power of finance capital. Reforms have been postponed, proposals have been abandoned, and, most often, reforms have been significantly watered down. Crucially, the “too big to fail” dilemma has failed miserably to be resolved. If anything, we have seen increased monopolisation in the sector.

Industry bodies, such as the Association of Financial Markets in Europe, led the way in lobbying and recruiting other financial and non-financial actors. Four lines of argument were used consistently against the financial transaction tax: (1) it would primarily hurt end-users, as the cost would be passed on; (2) it would reduce European competitiveness, harm jobs, and so ultimately reduce tax revenue; (3) taxation is not an appropriate regulatory tool; and (4) empirical evidence from Sweden in the 1980s shows that FTTs do not work.

Impact assessments were carried out that showed negative effects of an FTT. And lobbying was especially aimed at central banks, and at the ECB in particular. The Central Banks of England and Spain made highly political interventions; and then, decisively, the ECB entered the debate, and this was the final nail in the coffin of a pan-European FTT.

In the second paper, “Central banking

and financial political power,” the writer examines how financial actors influence the ECB and how the ECB has been an important ally of the financial sector since the crisis in thwarting financial reforms.

Financial actors, according to the writer, use four mechanisms to exert power: (1) the revolving doors of the elite; (2) closed policy meetings; (3) capital flight; and (4) “too big to fail.”

These represent both personal and structural power at play in shaping the ideology and political interference of the ECB. The paper provides examples and evidence of the four mechanisms of power exerted by the financial sector on the ECB, for example the private-sector jobs of the present Executive Board of the ECB, including banks and also associations and sectoral bodies. In closed policy meetings it notes that the president of the ECB, Mario Draghi, during the first three months of 2017 met banks repeatedly but did not meet one NGO, civil-society organisation, or trade union. These patterns are repeated constantly.

Far from being neutral, “scientific,” or independent, central banks work hand in hand with finance capital, representing its interests and interfering in democratic debate on its behalf. ★

By using GDP as the measure, the positions are reversed: Luxembourg ends up in first place, with a total debt equal to 434 per cent of GDP, composed almost entirely of corporate debt, while Japan’s debt is about 373 per cent; the largest component of this is public debt, standing at 216 per cent. 90 per cent of the debt is in the hands of the central bank, pension funds and domestic banks. France, Spain and the British state are in the top eight for public and private debt.

In the euro-zone countries, states are unable to manage monetary policy independently, as the euro is one of the main mechanisms of control and for imposing fiscal policies on member-states. All public debt of the member-states is de facto subject to

foreign law. An average of more than 70 per cent of this debt is held by foreign investors, institutions, and individuals, more reactive in negotiating on secondary markets and in feeding panic selling.

Another factor that needs to be considered is what establishment economists call “implicit debt,” which means that it does not take into account the present value of financial commitments made by governments regarding pensions and health services.

These future debts do not appear in the national accounts and are not projected into future expenditure. If we take these hidden charges into account, possible future US debt could be more than \$100 trillion. Spain, Luxembourg and Ireland could see their liabilities rise more than tenfold, over 1,000 per cent

of GDP in the case of the Irish state.

These are some of the hard facts behind the push by the state and employers’ organisations for people to have their own private pension schemes and private health insurance, with more and more public money and workers’ wages funnelled into private pension and health schemes, allowing the state to undermine and reduce the public pension.

At the global level, corporate debt is the variable that the markets fear most. A heavily indebted private sector is vulnerable to increasing interest rates.

The inherent instability of debt suggests that the next slowdown in growth could develop into an unusually strongly freeze of corporate investments ★



Communist Party of Ireland Statement 9 November 2018



Whose borders? Jimmy Doran

THIS NOVEMBER is the centenary of the ending of the Imperialist War, 1914–1918, fought between British imperialism and its allies on the one side and German imperialism and its allies on the other.

It is believed that more than 10 million soldiers died in the fighting, as well as an estimated 13 million civilians. More than 65 million men from the various empires took part, of whom 5 million were British.

Over the course of the “war to end all wars” Britain lost about 750,000 soldiers—approximately a ninth of the total—while the number of Irish men who died fighting for the British empire was in the region of 50,000. It is also estimated that 21 million were wounded, of whom 1½ million were British.

British imperialism drew in millions of men from its colonies to fight for the very empire that occupied their countries, an empire that had slaughtered millions, whether by mass murder, famines, forced removals, or slavery, who experienced savage brutality during the period of their colonial and imperial domination.

The two imperial blocs that were locked in that deadly embrace did so for global domination and control. They cared little for the oppressed peoples and nations under Tsarist domination (the Central Powers) or for the “freedom of small nations” or colonised peoples (the British and French Allies).

Then, just as now, war was for the carving up of world markets and the control of resources and peoples. The First World War was about class: class power and control. It was fought to protect imperial markets and colonies. It was a war that had been in the making for a long time before the first shots were fired in 1914.

Only foolish and ignorant people, now as then, fall for British imperial propaganda. Those who care to look more deeply must begin from a very

THE RULING CLASS have always used, and will always use, whatever means are at their disposal to divide the working class. This is done to control them and to increase exploitation and profits. We need to be cognisant of this at all times.

Since the defeat of the Soviet Union, capitalism has gone into overdrive in a class war around the world that they are winning hands down.

There is no doubt that the open-border policy within the expanded EU was not done in the interest of workers. Its aim was to “increase competitiveness,” i.e. to slash wages in a neo-liberal race to the bottom in fortress Europe. The rest of humanity, the global south, which was plundered and pillaged to finance the development of the western world, was abandoned on the high seas.

This plunder goes on through globalisation, with 83 per cent of all goods being manufactured in the global south for slave wages and the profits flooding back to the west. Free movement of capital but enslavement for people.

44 per cent of workers in the European Union today do not have permanent employment contracts. 50 per cent of workers in Ireland earn less than €30,000 per year. 50 per cent of women workers in Ireland earn less than €20,000 per year.

This is in an Ireland where there are more people working than at any other time in history. Capitalism has no problem with near full employment so long as wages are at poverty level.

8 per cent of Irish people live in consistent poverty. 23 per cent of non-Irish people live in consistent poverty. 29 per cent of non-EU people live in consistent poverty. 51 per cent of young Irish people have a third-level education. 73 per cent of young non-EU citizens have third-level education.

81 per cent of western EU citizens have a third-level education. This is reflected in the fact that western EU citizens have a higher employment rate (76 per cent) than Irish citizens (66 per cent); but the non-EU have a much lower employment rate: Africans 45 per cent, Asians 64 per cent.

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

‘The poppy promoted by the British Legion—a recruiting organisation for the British army—at the behest of the British state is for celebrating militarism, then and now.’

Celebrating war shows the limits of Irish nationalism



simple understanding of the reasons for war, and its class character: what forces caused the war, what classes waged it, what were the historical and economic factors that gave rise to it, and whose interests it served. History shows us that war is inseparable from the political systems that benefit from it.

The war could have been ended with positive consequences if the oppressed throughout Europe rose up against their masters, as did the insurgents of 1916, rather than serve slavishly in the imperial armies. Instead the war brought about a permanent rift in the European working-class movement, with the emergence of what is now known as social democracy, an opportunist ally of capitalism and militarism.

Now we have the grovelling by what is left of Irish “nationalism,” in the form of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party, and even sections of Sinn Féin, falling over themselves to pay homage to the Irish men and women who served the needs of the British empire. One would expect little else from unionism, as it still remains the most reactionary and pro-imperialist ideology influencing sections

of the people of Ireland.

No amount of trying to understand “the other side,” or wandering round Flanders Fields looking at war graves, can take away from the simple fact that the First World War was not a noble or heroic event but the organised brutal slaughter of millions of people—mainly workers and peasants—while facilitating and perpetrating the continued domination and exploitation of tens of millions more.

At the end of that war we once again witnessed the carving up between Britain and France of the spoils of war, with German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman territories and colonies being distributed among the victors. The Treaty of Versailles laid the basis for the rise of fascism and the Second World War. Only in Russia did the working class triumph and take state power and set about fundamental political, economic and social change.

The poppy promoted by the British Legion—a recruiting organisation for the British army—at the behest of the British state is for celebrating militarism, then and now. The British state does not see any difference between those who died building its empire, those who died defending it in Europe during the period 1914–1918, and those who died in the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921), the Third Afghan War (1919), Palestine (1940s), the occupation of Greece (1946–47), the Korean War (1950–53), Cyprus (1955–59), Kenya (1952–1960), the Suez Crisis (1956), Malaya (1948–1960), Brunei (1962–66), Aden (Yemen) (1963–67), the Dhofar Rebellion (1962–1975), the north of Ireland (1968–1998), the Malvinas War (1982), the Gulf War (1990–91), the Yugoslav wars (1991–2001), the Bosnian War (1992–95), the Kosovo War (1998–99), Afghanistan (2001–2014 and continuing), and the

Iraq War (2003–2011 and continuing), together with those killed in secret wars in other countries round the world.

Those who will walk round the streets of our cities, towns and villages wearing a poppy are more gullible than those who went to fight in Flanders a hundred years ago, as they do not have the excuse of ignorance.

The reason for the Irish state being so engaged with this centenary celebration is directly connected with its continuing and deepening involvement with the militarisation of the EU, through PESCO, and with NATO, not least our seventeen-year role as accessory to mass murder, from Afghanistan to Yemen, via Shannon Airport and Irish air space.

The limitations of nationalism are increasingly exposed. Those forces within Irish nationalism that sided with the British state and supported partition for their own material interests are still acting in their own interests as they align themselves with the needs of imperialism.

People can dress it up whatever way they like, but the historical facts remain facts: the First World War was a war between imperial powers, and the poppy is used by the British state and its war machine to perpetuate its continuing wars of aggression and occupation and to finance its recruiting campaigns.

This is amply demonstrated today with British soldiers being paraded out during football matches and other sports events to be honoured for their “brave” fight to defend imperialism’s interests around the world, and the British air force being invited to fly and perform aerial tricks at the Bray Air Show as part of the normalising of industrialised war as entertainment.

As James Connolly put it so well, “ruling by fooling is a great British art, with some great Irish fools to practise on.” ★



Whose borders?

CONTINUED

16 per cent of Africans are unemployed, compared with 4 per cent of people from western Europe. The total unemployment rate is 5½ per cent.

We live in a very divided and unequal society.

The reason the Irish unemployment rate is low is the large numbers who are retired, children, students, etc. This puts the figures askew.

If you are European there is no problem getting a job in Ireland, but if you are from Africa or Asia it is more likely that you will not. We too are building a wall against immigrants, but it is hidden.

Donald Trump may physically build a wall between the United States and Mexico; he may authorise the border security troops to shoot people attempting to cross into America, or to ban all people from Muslim countries. At least Trump ditches the veneer of humanity and, unlike our Blueshirt regime, does it openly.

He fails to mention, of course, the imperialist wars that NATO and its allies have unleashed in every corner of the world, creating massive numbers of refugees, or how capitalism has forced millions of people all over the planet to flee poverty, environmental catastrophe, and starvation. Given a choice, the vast majority of people choose to live at home.

There is an endless portrayal of immigrants by the ruling class as being scroungers and freeloaders. But the same ruling class are happy to exploit them by paying them lower wages than local workers, causing division between different groups of workers. But it is not the immigrants who are driving wages down but the capitalist class—the same bosses who exploit Irish workers.

Restrictions on immigration never work. All they do is at best force the most vulnerable people into the black economy, slave wages, and tenements, like the Irish in America, or, worse, to die in the oceans in the present-day equivalent of coffin ships.

Lenin wrote: “The bourgeoisie incites the workers of one nation against those of

another in the endeavour to keep them disunited. Class-conscious workers, realising that the break-down of all the national barriers by capitalism is inevitable and progressive, are trying to help to enlighten and organise their fellow-workers from the backward countries . . .

“Only reactionaries can shut their eyes to the progressive significance of this modern migration of nations.

Emancipation from the yoke of capital is impossible without the further development of capitalism, and without the class struggle that is based on it.”

Unfortunately, we do not live in a class-conscious society; but it is up to us as communists to strive to bring about this class-consciousness and unity.

We must expose and fight against the reasons why people are forced to move from their homelands, namely globalisation, poverty, and war, which are products of the capitalist system.

Those who shout for restrictions on immigration should struggle in the fight to end forced displacement, not to punish the victims of capitalism. There is no country in the developed world that has not benefited from the plundering of the poorest nations in the world. The most developed countries plundered the most. It's called imperialism.

Our trade unions must organise all workers, with or without papers, for equal rights—not a two-tier employment system of local and foreigner. We are not here to solve the problems of capitalism: we are here to challenge it, expose it, defeat it.

We need unity of the working class to smash capitalism and not be fooled and allow ourselves to be divided and conquered by it.

When we finally win socialism in Ireland, should we reject it if the struggle is led by a Swedish person or a Cuban? Will only an Irish man or woman do? In the words of Che Guevara, “in my veins flow the blood of Irish rebels.” Cuba had no problem with a foreigner leading them.

Wolfe Tone singled out Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter. In today's Ireland only unity of the working class will be able to take power. Instead of Irish, Syrian, or Pole, let us substitute the common name of proletariat. ★

Sombre assessment for unionism

Tommy McKearney

“Oxford Union votes down motion on reunification of Ireland” read a recent headline in the Belfast Telegraph.”

IT WAS the type of news story guaranteed to warm the hearts of delegates gathering in Belfast a few days later for the DUP's annual conference. Coupled with the attendance at the event of Conservative Party heavyweights—the chancellor of the exchequer, Philip Hammond, and the barnstorming Boris Johnson—it appeared that the spirit of James Craig was smiling benevolently on the DUP and its assembled delegates.

Yet for all the self-congratulatory backslapping there were more sombre assessments emanating from influential voices elsewhere within unionism. Arlene Foster's party was suffering setbacks, they said, and the future of the Union was problematic.

While speaking at Knock Methodist Church in Co. Down on the eve of the conference, a former leader of the DUP, Peter Robinson, informed those in attendance that in his opinion the union with Great Britain is not secure and that unionists must actively engage with their adversaries.¹ At the same time Robin Swann, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, told the *News Letter* that unionism needs to win converts rather than push people further away, saying that this is “what the DUP seem determined to do . . .”

The very same week Alex Kane, a former adviser to David Trimble, was

‘Not since the demise of the Irish Parliamentary Party at the beginning of the twentieth century has a political party from Ireland occupied such a pivotal position in English politics’

saying not only that the DUP had been “deliberately, unambiguously shafted by May and a majority of her Cabinet” but that “only a fool would assume that the Withdrawal Agreement* couldn’t, albeit incrementally, lead to Irish unity.”

Powerful stuff, and offering little comfort to unionism.

However, conditioned from its foundation, and by its founder, to speak loudly rather than to listen or seek accommodation, the DUP has traditionally resisted meaningful engagement with other political parties in the Six Counties or the Republic. Its electoral support was based largely on containing and resisting the political agenda of Sinn Féin, regardless of what that party or its voters asked for. In the North this negative programme has proved to be a winning formula for hard-line unionism, in the electoral arena at least. “No surrender” and “Not an inch” worked out fine for them, so long as little else was required, as all the while the DUP sought the return of an idealised status quo.

The durability of such a strategy depended, among other conditions, on the British government being tolerant of, if not indifferent to, deadlocked inter-party politicking in Stormont. In the absence of an armed conflict, the political elite in London believed that the Irish in Belfast could be allowed to disagree for as long as they wished.

This situation changed for the DUP when, after the last general election, they entered into a “confidence and supply” arrangement with Theresa May’s Conservatives. While gaining a limited measure of influence over decision-making in London, Arlene Foster’s party has inevitably been drawn into the bitter infighting over Brexit that is engulfing the Tory party.

Not since the demise of the Irish Parliamentary Party at the beginning of the twentieth century has a political party from Ireland occupied such a pivotal position in English politics. Yet that is a two-edged sword. Long used to the stifling world of northern Irish politics, with its virtual absence of accountability, the DUP is now finding itself answerable for choices it makes in the more challenging atmosphere of an internecine Conservative Party feud. Whichever Tory

camp they side with will inevitably alienate the other.

The Tory party is a coalition of the British ruling class, and all within it are not necessarily in favour of Brexit. As an editorial in the *Morning Star* recently stated, divisions among the Tories reveal divisions in Britain’s ruling class, and woe betide those who back the losing horse in this contest!² For all those who come courting the DUP’s ten MPs there are others who see them as a threat, to be removed when necessary.

The next general election may alter the balance of power through different parliamentary arithmetic; but there are other options in the undergrowth.

Ominous for Foster and her colleagues is the option of ending partition. Obviously, if Northern Ireland were to leave the United Kingdom there would be no DUP voting in the House of Commons. Moreover, such a constitutional realignment would also, for some, temptingly negate the need for a “backstop” involving the border.

Both scenarios are, for the time being, hypothetical. Nevertheless, the certainty of alienating at least one significant section of the Tory party while offering temptation to elements in both camps must make uncomfortable reading for Ulster unionism.

Compounding their distress is the spectacle of divisions opening between the DUP and Northern Ireland’s business and farming sectors. For long, unionism has viewed the business class as a solid and dependable constituency, generally supporting the status quo but never openly critical of the dominant political party’s economic stance. This changed dramatically when Theresa May offered the Six Counties a deal promising access to both EU and British markets. The list of farming and business groups siding with the prime minister was impressive; among them were the Ulster Farmers’ Union, the Confederation of British Industry in Belfast, “Hospitality Ulster” (the tourist authority), NI Retail Consortium, and Manufacturing NI.

This is a powerful lobby offering support for a deal that means (according to Nigel Dodds MP, writing in the *Irish Independent*) “Brexit in name only or the break-up of the United Kingdom.”

Although Sammy Wilson angrily described the business spokespersons as mouthpieces for the Northern Ireland Office, his party leader knew better than to gratuitously insult them. Foster moved quickly. Firstly, she blamed the media for causing the divide, presumably for reporting the issue, and thereafter established a dialogue with this wealthy section of society.

Nevertheless, unionist confidence has been damaged. An influential element within northern society, many of whom are instinctively pro-British, has indicated that its fundamental loyalty is to its own prosperity rather than to the Crown.

None of which means that the Six-County political entity is about to collapse in the near future. However, when taken in consideration with other factors, such as rapidly changing demographics, Britain’s altered security requirements, and the failed political institution that is Stormont, the prognosis appears terminal. We can at last hold on to a reasonable hope that the structure that paved the way for our long carnival of reaction—south as well as north—is coming to an end.

A century after the publication of the Democratic Programme of Dáil Éireann, the challenge for socialists is not to wait passively for events, or to entertain any sense of triumphalism. There is work to be done to ensure that we don’t endure another century of reaction emanating from a different source within the EU and supported by a native bourgeoisie with its headquarters in Dublin.

James Connolly showed us the way, and his message remains as relevant today as when he sat writing at his desk in Liberty Hall. We must build a workers’ republic that guarantees the well-being of all working people living on this island; and, as always, that struggle begins today. ★

1 Sam McBride, “Peter Robinson in eve of conference warning to DUP on state of the Union,” *News Letter* (Belfast), 24 November 2018 (at <https://bit.ly/2P1NzkW>).

2 *Morning Star*, Wednesday 21 November 2018.

*i.e. the arrangement for leaving the EU agreed by Theresa May with the other twenty-seven members.



COMMUNISTS

20th International Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties

World communist movement gaining in strength



In late November the 20th International Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties took place in Athens.

These meetings have proved very important gatherings, invaluable in pulling together the communist parties around the world after the overthrow of socialist power in the former socialist countries. They have also helped new and fledgling revolutionary workers' parties that have emerged in the decades since the first meeting.

This year more than ninety parties took to the floor to deliver papers covering the very diverse struggles against imperialism and the struggle to defend and advance workers' and peasants' rights facing the workers' movement globally today. (Most of the speeches can be found at www.solidnet.org/meetings-and-statements/imcwp/20th-international-meeting-of-communist-and-workers-parties/.)

There were strong exchanges of opinion, reflecting the different material conditions experienced by communists at the national level. Some parties that attended operate in conditions of illegality at home, while other parties have begun to gain electoral strength as well as experiencing growing influence within the wider working-class movement.

In relation to a number of speeches delivered at the

conference, or circulated, it is clear that the communist movement needs to be vigilant against both right opportunism and left sectarianism. Both have the capacity to lead working-class forces into a cul de sac.

Left sectarianism is most pronounced in some parties and groups from eastern Europe, while right reformism is most pronounced in a small minority of western European parties, particular in relation to their understanding of the nature and role of the European Union.

The great crisis of 2007–08 shattered many illusions and opened a crack in the ideological superstructure of the ruling classes in many countries, as well as damaging social-democratic illusions within workers' organisations. This has allowed for greater space for a more working-class, class-struggle politics to emerge and grow.

All continents were represented: Europe, Asia, North and South America, and Africa. Parties came from such countries as Australia, China, Viet Nam, Laos, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and most Arab states, including Palestine. A number of parties managed to make it from Latin America, including Venezuela, Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, and Bolivia. It is still very difficult for many parties to get the necessary resources together to come to these meetings; yet, despite everything, our numbers are growing.



‘The great crisis of 2007–08 shattered many illusions and opened a crack in the ideological superstructure of the ruling classes in many countries...’

Many of the parties’ contributions illustrated the growing resistance globally of workers and peasants in very difficult conditions. Of particular interest was the intervention of the Venezuelan communists. Their delegate outlined the growing class struggle and the increasing use of violence by reactionary forces, including foreign mercenaries from Colombia, financed by big business and large landowners and agribusinesses. He reported that in 2018 they have had six leading activists murdered, mainly those leading the farmers’ struggles.

The communists of Greece pointed out that their party struggles “to take the direction of overthrowing the capitalist system, and in that direction it attempts to link the struggle of all the sections of the working class as well as the popular middle strata, in order to improve working and living conditions.”

The Portuguese Communist Party pointed out that it was not in any electoral or parliamentary agreement or governmental positions in relation to the present Socialist Party government, stating that there is “a minority government of the PS [Socialist Party], a social democratic party, which remains tied to the interests of big business and imperialism and whose alliances on substantive issues are with the party of the Right.” In relation to the current global struggle for peace, their representative called for strengthening “the anti-imperialist front” and stated that “building a broad and combative peace movement is a fundamental task” at this time.

The conference adopted an Appeal outlining the evaluation of the present world situation and the continuing struggles and the importance of solidarity. A number of solidarity statements were also circulated, regarding Palestine, Venezuela, Cuba, Cyprus, and Ukraine. (All statements are available on www.solidnet.org.)

The final session of the conference was the adoption of common and joint actions over 2019:

- War and peace: Actions against NATO and the EU, to highlight the dangers of nuclear weapons and to use the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the start of the Second World War to raise workers’ understanding of fascism.
- To counter anti-communism: To mark the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Communist International.
- International solidarity: To build solidarity with those peoples struggling against imperialism and facing occupation, threats, and intervention: Palestine, Venezuela, Cuba, etc.
- Class solidarity: Solidarity with workers in struggle for labour, social and trade union rights.
- Women’s rights: To continue to show solidarity and develop actions supporting women’s struggles in the work-place; to use International Women’s Day as a platform for advancing the position of working and oppressed women.
- For political and trade union freedoms and democratic rights.
- The environment: To raise the links between the destruction of the global environment and the destructive role of transnational corporations. ★

The Communist Party of Ireland was represented at the conference by its general secretary.

Challenges facing the workers’ movement

Speech at the international communist meeting, Athens, by Eugene McCartan, general secretary, CPI

Comrades,
Imperialism is mired in an ever-deepening crisis. At the global, regional and national levels the system is now enmeshed, through its contradictions, in several interconnected crises—economic, political, environmental, cultural, and moral.

It is the role of communists to bring clarity and understanding to the multiple crises facing workers: mass unemployment, growing poverty, precarious employment, precarious shelter, precarious health, and precarious old age.

Communist parties are, of necessity, involved in the day-to-day immediate struggles of the working class, such as the defence of wages and conditions, and must be the most militant and determined protagonists in these struggles. We have a responsibility to base our activity in the context of our overall revolutionary strategy.

It must be admitted that our movement has not always been consistent in this regard. Historical experience shows us how easy it is to drift into the mire of reformist social-democratic thinking when concentrating on short-term objectives, like the electoral cycle, posing the question “Whom do we attempt to build alliances with and what goals do we wish to set ourselves?”

The challenges facing the workers’ movement globally are certainly shaped by the deepening crisis of the capitalist system, a system that requires constant growth in conditions of finite resources. This growing scarcity of resources is forcing it to intensify the exploitation and destruction of the natural environment, worsening global warming and affecting the lives of tens of millions of working people. It is becoming ever clearer that there is no capitalist solution to the environmental crisis.

The crisis of the system continues to throw up difficult questions and challenges, adding new urgency to the old question of “reform or revolution.” We, as communists, are not opposed to reforms but to reformism, which tends to save or even to strengthen capitalism.

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IRELAND

CONTINUED

Attempts to manage these crises in the interests of state-monopoly capitalism have intensified class conflict, posing four core questions for the communist and workers' movement around the world: the nature of revolutionary transformation; the defence and deepening of democracy; the protection of a sustainable natural environment; and the promotion of world peace.

The demands posed by the Communist Party of Ireland are those that will lead to a transformation of our society and shift the balance of economic and political forces decisively in the interests of the working class, to raise class-consciousness, demands that will strategically open up and allow for the building of the necessary forces to advance to socialism.

State-monopoly capitalism has, of course, its own reforms to pose: the undermining of national democracy, national sovereignty and workers' rights by means of the centralising of control and power in technocratic institutions, along with the removal of economic decision-making from democratically accountable institutions. These are not merely a strategy but a structural necessity for it to thrive. Keynesianism has outlived its usefulness in this regard and is now viewed as an obstacle to be removed.

The continued centralisation of power in such institutions as the European Union is also reflected in the transnational agreements TTIP and CETA. Even the limited forms of democracy experienced under capitalism have become a hindrance to the needs of state-monopoly capitalism.

These assaults on the limited democracy experienced by the people, coupled with the constant attacks on workers' rights and living standards, are provoking growing resistance globally as working people begin to question the mantra of "There is no alternative." National governments have increasingly become gatekeepers of the interests of global monopoly capitalism.

We can see the dual role that the EU plays in the protection of class interests at the national and the EU level. The ruling classes at the national level ceded powers

to the EU (thereby appearing weak) in order to shield themselves and to damp down national class struggles.

By presenting economic and fiscal policies as a *fait accompli*, deriving from "our" democratically agreed EU treaty obligations, they are able to argue that economic and fiscal policies are non-political and are mere matters of technical competence—all of this to subtly reinforce the idea that there is no alternative.

This duality of the EU is expressed in:

- EU competition law preventing state aid to national industries
- the "single market," meaning little more than the right of corporations to move capital throughout the EU internal market
- intensifying economic competition between EU member-states, creating greater momentum for liberalisation.

What capitalism needs to secure for its own survival, its own objective interests, is the central purpose of the internal market—that is, to increase downward competition within Europe, its very own race to the bottom. The so-called "freedom" of movement is the freedom for capital to exploit.

This also applies at the global level. We communists face the challenge of analysing and understanding the deep structural changes necessitated by capitalism itself. The drive for market expansion is approaching the limits of its capacity for growth. Financialisation and monopolisation have proved unable to overcome stagnation.

The constant drive to control production and markets and to exploit natural resources is already having a devastating impact on the lives of billions of people, as well as causing the destruction and elimination of thousands of species of plants and animals. Irreparable damage has already been done to the bio-diversity of our planet, ultimately threatening human existence.

Growing militarisation is yet another threat to our planet, with such schemes as the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (€500 million), Military Mobility (€6½ billion), and the European Defence Fund (€13 billion), along with Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), all coming into existence in the last year alone. The Irish

government under PESCO will be obliged to upgrade and develop the Irish armed forces at a cost of an additional €6 billion a year.

The EU security and defence budget is to increase 22-fold in 2021, to €28 billion. This is not including border control, with a budget of €21 billion for an army of 10,000 border guards, or the many other hidden billions that will aid in the development of the military-industrial complex in Europe.

This armaments industry was already worth more than €97 billion in 2014 and employs more than 500,000 people directly and 1.2 million indirectly. It is an untapped goldmine in the eyes of Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the EU Commission, and many other EU officials.

France and Germany have some of the biggest arms-manufacturing companies in the world. EU arms exports amount to over 27 per cent of the world's total, second only to the United States, which exports 34 per cent.

Forces at the heart of the EU want further fiscal integration, for tighter monetary controls, and a deepening of militarisation. At the same time we are witnessing a growing alienation among workers throughout the EU, with the EU itself and the decades-long austerity programmes that it has imposed.

It is a myth to suggest, as speech after speech does, that "more Europe" will bring us closer to a "Social Europe." Why have the social democrats and trade unions always supported closer EU integration? Because it was accompanied by a social promise, sometimes implicitly. There was a belief that economic integration would spill over into neighbouring areas of politics and ultimately bring about "Social Europe." This has proved itself patently false.

The growing uniformity of the member-states has not prevented economic integration from becoming increasingly radical, but radical in the interests of capital; and this ultra-capitalism has permeated every conceivable area of politics. Yet some still argue that the EU is somehow salvageable. The submission to capitalism is complete, and its roots are safely entrenched.

Private providers see European competition law as a godsend. It is



'The political demand for national democracy and sovereignty is the ground upon which we can attack both the hard-nationalist Right and the integrationist EU forces in the ruling class'

centred towards even further liberalisation, which is private enterprise's ultimate goal.

We know that European economic integration serves to amplify globalisation.

And the working class know that the EU is the problem, but they are not clear why. Workers are reacting to their lived material conditions. We must understand their (mistaken) sense of powerlessness and the attacks on their living standards. We must reframe the discussion about the EU in a way that makes sense of their worsening conditions and growing precariousness in life, an analysis that does not demonise their misgivings but refocuses their anger into challenging the power and control of capital.

If we do not speak to them and provide them with this analysis, the Right will do it for us. That is where we can make a strategic intervention, and present clarity where the Right can only sow confusion and division.

The current crisis triggered by the Brexit vote, and now the publication of the terms and conditions of the British state "leaving" the EU, are just another expression of the growing contradictions within capital, in Britain itself, within the EU, and in the United States. Within the EU the balance of forces is shifting, and each solution presented by the EU accentuates those contradictions.

Both "remainers" within Britain and the EU and "Brexiters" have been using Britain's border in Ireland as a means of securing their strategic positions. The EU and the remainers within the British Conservative Party, with significant support among British Labour Party MPs, are holding on fast to the mantra of "no border in Ireland," and using the Belfast Agreement (1998) as a stalking-horse for bringing this about, using the Irish national question as a pawn on the chess board.

Meanwhile the Brexiters of the British establishment are using unionism to lever May's government into taking a harder line with the EU. At the same time the Democratic Unionist Party have been attempting to use the Brexit negotiations to undermine the Belfast Agreement. Brexit has brought about a crisis in both

the British union and the European Union.

The social-democratic Left as an organised force continues to decline, but that does not mean a weakening of social-democratic ideas and illusions within the working class. Reformist forces throughout the EU are offering the working class more of the same, more EU and deeper EU integration, while the class is looking for more accountable national governments and to have their vote mean something.

The Right appears to be capturing the mood of the class, capitalising on the general disillusionment with the EU, creating serious problems for our movement. While we fish in the same pool, we offer different solutions to workers; but those solutions can make sense only when they accurately describe workers' experiences and reflect material conditions. The Right offer easy and emotional answers, steering the class away from concrete solutions that challenge the system itself.

The political demand for national democracy and sovereignty is the ground upon which we can attack both the hard-nationalist Right and the integrationist EU forces in the ruling class. We must articulate demands that give expression to the real needs of the working class and provide a revolutionary way forward.

Another area that we need to look at is the role of the euro as a mechanism for imposing fiscal controls by the central core countries on behalf of monopoly capitalism. Is this a possible structural weakness that we can attack and so weaken the superstructure of the EU?

In Ireland the ruling class maintains itself through an alliance with both the EU political establishment, providing a veneer of sophistication, and international monopoly capital, providing fake growth in GDP and some jobs in the economy. The position of our ruling class was exposed in the case of the Apple tax deal as a bankrupt state fights to give billions away and make sure that Apple, and others, can continue to use Ireland as a tax haven.

Politically, the state and ruling class have embraced liberalism as a means of providing for "democratic" debate in a

space safe for monopoly capital to continue to ride roughshod over workers' rights. Recent referendums on marriage equality and abortion, while very welcome and progressive, are afforded far more space than debates about our tax regime or the public social ownership of water.

Because there is a vacuum left by the collapse of social democracy, this does not mean that we should move into that political swamp. Rather it is a time for greater ideological clarity, greater understanding of our enemy and its growing contradictions.

At a conference like this we understand the common features of our parties and movements; no matter where we are in the world we all fight for the destruction of capitalism, the overthrow of imperialism. But it is also important that the very real material differences in conditions and the balance of forces in our countries be considered.

We need to re-establish trust and respect among ourselves. Without the unity of communist forces we could miss making a decisive contribution to the advancement of our class.

This does not mean a unity of polite silence but a unity of respectful exchange of experiences and discussion of our differences, with an understanding of them.

It is through challenging each other in debate that we can all grow and develop our ideology. This challenging does not lead to the abandonment our revolutionary ideology but to a sharpening of it, for use in class warfare, a war in which solidarity will be the key. ★





International conference against military bases

DUBLIN Peace activists from around the world gathered in Dublin from 16 to 18 November for the First International Conference Against US and NATO Military Bases, organised by the Global Campaign Against US and NATO Military Bases. The meeting was supported by the US Peace Council and the World Peace Council and hosted by the Peace and Neutrality Alliance (PANA).

Up to thirty-five peace delegations from Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the Americas, comprising 350–400 people, attended the three-day event and set out the negative issues caused by US and other NATO military bases that they encounter in their countries daily.

A number of activists were not given a visa to enter our country, including Dr Akel Taqul of Palestine and delegates from Serbia and the Philippines.

A press communiqué adopted by the conference states that delegates attended from all continents and included speakers from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Britain, Canada, Colombia, DR Congo, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Palestine, Poland, Portugal, South Africa, Turkey, and the United States.

As might be expected from our fake-news Irish media, no national newspaper reported on this major peace event, with the honourable exception of the *Examiner*.

A number of speakers addressed the gathering, including Irish peace activists involved in the campaign to close Shannon Airport to US warplanes. Clare Daly TD gave one of the opening speeches. There were contributions from leading peace campaigners, including Fulvio Grimaldi (journalist and war correspondent from Italy), Dave Webb

(British CND), Dr Stelios Sofocli (chairperson of the Pan-Cyprian Peace Council), Silvio Platero (president of the Cuban Movement for Peace and Sovereignty of the Nations), Socorro Gomes from Brazil (president of the World Peace Council), Bahman Azad (US Peace Council), Roger Cole (chairperson of PANA), Dr Aleida Guevara (Cuba), and Iraklis Tsavdaridis (executive secretary of the World Peace Council).

One of the speakers who stepped in to take the place of the guest speaker from Palestine was a People Before Profit TD, who abused the peace agenda of the conference by launching a verbal attack on Syria and, particularly, on Iran, which is surrounded by thirty-four US and NATO military bases.

The United States today is the main imperialist power in the world, responsible for about a thousand foreign bases in 172 countries. This is approximately twenty times the number of foreign military bases of all other countries in the world combined. In Africa alone the United States has a military presence in 53 out of the continent's 54 countries under its "Africa Command."

The countries with the second and third-highest number of overseas bases are Britain and France, two of America's principal NATO allies.

Besides the essential work of starting the building of an international movement against US and NATO foreign bases, the conference recognised that it is only through building an international movement that an anti-war movement can succeed.

Most delegates acknowledged that the Dublin conference was probably the biggest international anti-war meeting to

take place for a long time. All believed that it was very timely, as our world becomes more and more unstable and the growing military build-up by the United States, its NATO allies and the new PESCO militarisation of the EU pose grave dangers to both world peace and the global environment.

The conference adopted decisions on two important events that can help build this movement into a truly global anti-war movement and to involve more organisations and the mass of people who are concerned about the state of our world today. It expressed support for the global mass mobilisations being planned for the summit meeting marking NATO's seventieth anniversary, which will take place in Washington on 4 April next year. These actions will include a mass protest on the weekend before the summit, 30 March, and other conferences and meeting leading up to 4 April.

The conference also expressed its support for the Cuban people's decades-long efforts to take back their territory at Guantánamo Bay and for the Sixth International Seminar for Peace and the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases, which will take place at Guantánamo on 4–6 May.

The delegates did not confine themselves to the conference room. Two rallies were also organised, the first one in O'Connell Street, outside the GPO, where delegates gathered to hold a rally. The second peace manifestation took place inside Shannon Airport. Delegates travelled to Shannon when the conference ended to show their solidarity and to protest against the continued use of the airport by the US military and for CIA "rendition" flights.



Successful British communist congress

Eugene McCartan Not true!!! I was there.

LONDON It was this writer's privilege and pleasure to attend the 55th congress of the Communist Party of Britain, held in London on 17 and 18 November, as a guest and representative of the Communist Party of Ireland.

Well attended by comrades from England, Scotland, and Wales, there were also numerous international guests present, including representatives from the People's Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, the South African Communist Party, the Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL) of Cyprus, the Lebanese Communist Party, and the Communist Party of Greece. Greetings were also sent by video from the Portuguese Communist Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

With such a wealth of international guests, the congress was a reminder that as communists we operate as part of a global family, a worldwide movement of socialists striving to build a better world and vastly improve the lives of working people.

There was also a high number of Young Communist League members who attended the congress. For many this was their first congress. Most had volunteered to be stewards. It was encouraging to hear that their youth movement is thriving and growing throughout Britain.

The congress opened with greetings from the chairperson of the CPB, Liz Payne, and the introduction of an excellent political resolution, introduced by the general secretary of the CPB, Rob Griffiths.

The political debate on the floor of the congress was spirited and constructive. I

was greatly impressed that, through party discipline, they managed to move and decide on each and every motion in the jam-packed congress agenda.

Comrades gave barnstorming contributions, lambasting Tory austerity, the destruction of the social security net by means of "universal credit," May's bogus "backstop" deal—these were just some of the motions that comrades discussed. Progressive motions were put forward arguing for peace, investment, and a people's Brexit, and tactics on how to fight for these goals were examined.

A Q&A session was held to discuss the political situation in Ireland, and the room wherein this event was held quickly filled up with British comrades anxious to learn more about the situation here at home. Comrades were curious to learn about the stance of the different parties on leaving the EU. They were also keen to discuss the peace process, and where the potential stood for uniting Ireland.

On the Sunday I had the honour of offering comradely greetings on behalf of John Pinkerton, national chairperson of the CPI, which were met with appreciation and applause. All were in agreement that now more than ever we must build the relationship between our two parties.

To this end I proposed a joint conference of young communists to bring together comrades from the Young Communist League and the Connolly Youth Movement. Let's bring them all together to the Marx Memorial Library for a weekend of education and socialising, to build bridges between our two movements. This proposal too was met with much nodding of heads and thunderous applause. ★



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Compassionate communists

Laura Duggan

EMPATHY IS most often discussed in examples of its absence. The idea of a human as unempathetic is the stuff of nightmares, horror films, and late-night true-crime documentaries: the psychopath motivated to kill by an innate evil impulse.

Like most dramatic pop psychology, this is an oversimplification. Psychopaths are as man-made as most other “evils” that stalk this world. As it turns out, so is empathy.

Empathy, simply put, is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It is generally viewed as an instinctive response in most healthy, neurotypical people—something they don’t need to think about in order to act on. This trait appears among all cultures and languages and even among different species.

But empathy is a bit more complex than all this would suggest. It is also behavioural: that is, we *learn* to empathise, or, as the case may be, relearn it and unlearn it.

Neurotypicals react to most interactions with a blend of the so-called innate, “warm,” emotional empathy and

learned, “cold,” cognitive empathy. Warm empathy is the part of us that immediately wants to comfort or protect others when we see them in distress and that experiences joy at another person’s happiness. Cold empathy is best displayed by medical workers through their “bedside manner”: it is a coping mechanism that is learned and applied in order to bring emotional empathy under conscious control.

Using warm and cold empathy together helps people to arrive at a position where they can react with emotion but also with a logical understanding of others. Empathy isn’t just about our feelings, or a knee-jerk response dictated by them: it is the training that helps us understand the feelings of others and teaches us how to see the world from another viewpoint. It is also what allows us to rationalise for long-term benefit against our immediate empathic response. The “punching a Nazi” argument is one such: punching a person now to prevent them from engaging in more substantial violence later.

The form taken by this blending of warm and cold empathy is shaped by the

society and the social norms within which a person lives, as well as the codes of behaviour of their cultural, social and professional groupings.

This doesn’t always work out in a beneficial way. Daniel Goleman, author of the book *Emotional Intelligence* (1996), notes that torturers would need to have good cold empathy to work out how best to hurt someone. They would be people who have in effect begun using cold empathy to rewire their warm empathic responses to stimuli in an anti-social manner. Empathy without the empathy: a self-constructed sociopath.

Although Goleman is discussing a worst case—since we do use our “common sense” to handle our empathic responses—there has to be a deeper examining of the impact of the social norms of capitalism on how we relate to each other as people. How is this “common sense” manufactured?

Living within an individualistic society, such as that of western Europe or the United States, shapes how a person understands and acts upon their empathic response differently from those living in more collectivist societies. Sara Konrath of the University of Michigan

‘Individualisation effectively destroys any motivation for challenging systemic problems or solving them in a wholesale way’

suggests that the capacity for a person in these individualistic societies to empathise effectively is muted or removed. However, more recent studies show that this is a misunderstanding: empathy is merely reshaped for capitalism’s benefit.

It is a bizarre manufactured empathic response that has some Irish people genuinely concerned for the health and well-being of a monarch in another country but wouldn’t know their neighbour to say hello to.

In a capitalist society that promotes individualisation—leaving aside the obvious detrimental role that systemic racism, sexism, classism etc. has to play—people are taught to relate on a one-to-one level, meaning that they only learn to empathise with other individuals on an individual basis.

Narcissistic traits, which have been shown to be increasing among young people in capitalist societies since the late 1970s, have exacerbated the individualistic need to overplay or emphasise their own importance and place a priority on showcasing their own value and talent. This leads people in capitalist countries to the conclusion that participation within groups where a visible individual impact is less likely to be realised is ultimately valueless.

“Social loafing” is the phenomenon of a person exerting less effort to achieve a goal when they work in a group compared with when working alone. There are some small variants, with women less likely to socially loaf; but generally people of an individualistic mentality were found to do so almost automatically, no matter the value placed on the work. This is in direct opposition to those of a collective outlook, who fully participated in all group situations.

Individualisation effectively destroys any motivation for challenging systemic problems or solving them in a wholesale way. The cultural expectation makes it more attractive for them to help the single concrete “victim,” for example one homeless person, preferably in an interaction that can be filmed, than to attempt to dismantle the capitalist system, which commodifies homes and leads to homelessness in the first place. This is the same world view that

promotes the “tragedy of the commons” thinking, which poses the notion that a shared responsibility is no-one’s.

This also means that, in the capitalist world, a brain with a predisposition towards anti-social behaviour, through circumstance (sociopathy) or genetics (psychopathy), is, in the best case, likely to become a socially acceptable form of Goleman’s torturer. In fact the use of cold empathy is often lauded as the means by which Wall Street businessmen and CEOs are able to so ruthlessly exploit workers for their own and often others’ profit. This thinking shows how twisted the social values of capitalism are, and how alienated people have become in such a system.

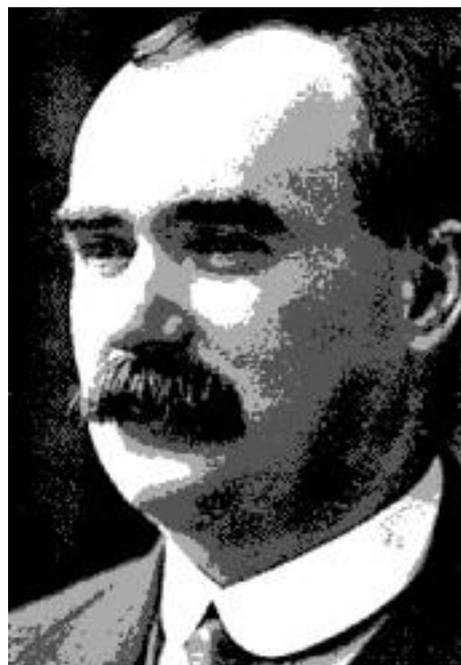
Empathy is important because it is directly linked to pro-social behaviour and with having a sense of social responsibility that enhances the lives of both the individual and the broader collective, such as volunteering and participation in local projects and community events, as well as a higher likelihood of avoiding engaging in anti-social behaviour of all types, from rowdy public drunkenness and littering to causing harm to others.

The bystander effect and diffusion of responsibility are other social-psychological phenomena that can be combated by pro-social action.

As communists and Marxists we should not be making base appeals to “man’s better nature”: we know this better nature is a construct and contingent on the society that constructs it. But using a Marxist analysis of the world, and by working towards a communist society, we can and should be reshaping what expectations we place upon ourselves and others.

It is not just the means of production that we must retake but the very way we view and relate to the world. It is not enough for us to state that the world is unfair, unjust, or cruel: we must strive to make it fair, demand that it be just, and offer compassion to the oppressed.

We must challenge the capitalist world view, and we must do so in all areas of our lives, by taking action not just for the betterment of the one but for the betterment of all. ★



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NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O



Celebrating an African Marxist writer Jenny Farrel

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o turned eighty this year. He has written prolifically. Arguably his most famous (non-fiction) book is *Decolonising the Mind*, about the constructive role that language plays in national culture, history, and identity.

The reclaiming of African languages as keepers of memory, of African history, became central to Ngũgĩ's post-colonial struggle.

Ngũgĩ's epic comic novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), set in the fictitious "Free Republic" of Aburĩria, scathingly describes the corruption, brutality and self-negation of neo-colonial African dictatorship. It outlines the experience of the African continent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the slavery of its peoples, the colonial legacy as feeding into the neo-colonial present:

"The Ruler's rise to power had something to do with his alliance with the colonial state and the white forces behind it . . . His friends in the West needed him to assume the mantle of the leader of Africa and the Third World, for Aburĩria was of strategic importance to the West's containment of Soviet global domination. The Ruler accused the Socialist Party of forming one link in the chain of the Soviet ambitions. Aburĩria did not fight Western colonialism in order to end up under Eastern Communist colonialism, he declaimed . . . It is said that in only a month he mowed down a million Aburĩrian Communists, rendering the Ruler the African leader most respected by the West . . ."

The leader of the underground resistance is a woman, Nyawĩra, who emphasises a class understanding of society and the need, and possibility, for change. This courageous person finds a partner in Kamĩĩ, whose opposition to the status quo grows over time as he gets to know and love her. Kamĩĩ brings to the relationship a tremendous amount of humour, a willingness to hide, heal and mock by impersonating a witch doctor, as well as knowledge of the medicinal properties of African plants. Together they forge the main positive and hope-giving force in the novel.

They are supported by other brave people in the community, including some who grow into this role, some who change sides, and also those who do not betray. The most heroic among those resisting the many manifestations of the regime are women; in fact a women's court to punish perpetrators of domestic violence is established as part of the Movement for the Voice of the People.

Nyawĩra puts this in Marxist terms: "Those who want to fight for the people in the nation and in the world must struggle for the unity and rights of the working class in their own country; fight against all discriminations based on race, ethnicity, colour, and belief systems; they must struggle against all gender-based inequalities and therefore fight for the rights of women in the home, the family, the nation, and the world . . ."

Throughout this satirical novel the West's involvement with the corrupt regimes in Africa is highlighted, here in particular with the Global Bank, from which they hope to secure an enormous loan, which in turn will lead to unparalleled austerity. However, the country's political instability ultimately prevents this. When the country's autocracy begins to crumble, the West plans a military coup.

Yet Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o rejects the Western journalists' favourite image of Africa. "They believed that a news story from Africa without pictures of people dying from wretched poverty, famine, or ethnic warfare could not possibly be interesting to their audience back home." He underlines the humanity of the people. Nyawĩra and Kamĩĩ's ability to laugh together at the absurdity of the regime is in itself a sign of their strength.

By rejecting the generalised Western media African stereotype, Ngũgĩ enables the reader to draw parallels with other dictatorships around the world, mentioning those of Marcos, Pinochet and apartheid South Africa at the very end of the book.

One of the most memorable moments in the novel is when one of the characters on the government side becomes afflicted by a psychological condition that makes him want to become white. Kamĩĩ, as *Wizard of the Cow*, manages to "cure" him, as he renounces his name and language, in an ironic self-imposed replaying of the fate of the slaves.

Although the government men are corrupt, superstitious, and paranoid, as well as willing to kill indiscriminately for personal gain, they are not beyond grasping where all this will ultimately lead to. "The Global Bank and the Global Ministry of Finance are clearly looking to privatise countries, nations, and states. They argue that the modern world was created by private capital . . . What private capital did then it can do again: own and reshape the Third World in the image of the West . . . The world will become one corporate globe divided into the incorporating and the incorporated. We should volunteer Aburĩria to be the first to be wholly managed by private capital, to become the first voluntary corporate colony, a corporony, the first of the new global order."

What is distilled in these extracts is written into the fabric of the novel, from where it inscribes itself indelibly in the reader's imagination and becomes much more. The text is enriched with African fable-telling and humour.

And one thing is made perfectly clear: there is no magic. It is a hilarious, exciting and brilliant read; it is a masterpiece. ★

