

# The Oxford Left Review

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## Editorial

Historically, the left has tended to be cautiously in favour of internationalism. Its desire to defend the most vulnerable has often led it to acknowledge that this includes those abroad. Moreover, many have recognised that there is much to be gained from working with and learning from those fighting similar struggles in other countries. At the same time, there has long been a concern that transnational forces are to be feared as threats to hard-won domestic achievements. Globalisation has consistently empowered corporations against people, and weakened the ability of democratic states to mitigate the depredations of international capital.

Events of the last couple of years have emphasised, if we needed reminding, that leftist analysis cannot ignore the global. The current eurozone crisis represents a highly consequential collision of globalisation, neo-liberalism and democracy. The wildfire of protest movements, from the Arab Spring to the Chilean and Quebecois student protests to the *Indignados* and Occupy Wall Street, highlight the variety of battles being waged around the world, and offer inspiration for those to come. And drought in the horn of Africa demonstrates the precariousness of life for the hundreds of millions in desperate poverty.

The articles in this issue of the OLR try to get to grips with the thorny question of how to respond and engage with these various developments. Most acknowledge the complexity and uncertainty that bedevils such a task, especially when we approach these problems from a distance. A common theme is that solutions to issues like global poverty are rarely straightforward. Leon is especially strident in his criticism of those, like the people behind the recent KONY 2012 campaign, who see conflict as a matter of individual personalities, saintly messiahs and evil villains. Meanwhile, Crockett takes a critical look at the phenomenon of micro-finance, regularly touted as a ‘silver bullet’ to help solve the problem of poverty. As she insists, “lending programmes were never meant as a panacea for global poverty, but rather developed as a humble attempt to empower the poor at the grassroots level”.

Our discussion of the organisation 80,000 Hours debates the latest in this long line of initiatives promising to improve the lives of the global poor. Todd and Farquhar argue for the idea that we should view career choices as an instrument to help relieve poverty. Their most eye-catching and controversial suggestion is that many people should pursue ‘professional philanthropy’ – that is, entering highly paid careers such as banking and consulting with the explicit aim of giving large amounts of money to charity. Yet as Mills argues in response, this is another strategy that seems likely to involve serious costs – allying yourself with the interests of your capitalist paymasters, a narrow focus on individual and not collective action, and

a sort of political quietism.

Indeed, Leon, Crockett, and Mills return to an old leftist theme: the tension between individualism and structuralism. Leon takes us back to Sociology 101: “as a rule of thumb, when seeking to explain or criticise something, don’t focus on the individual agent who acted in the particular instance, but rather the structures of power -- social, political, economic, cultural -- which permitted them to act”. He emphasises the point that an excessive focus on individuals – Obama, Kony, Madoff, or Mubarak – is a distraction from more serious structural questions, and is likely merely to create complacency. Yet Crockett suggests that feminist structural critiques of microfinance which accuse it of perpetuating an individualist, neo-liberal ideology are likely to undermine the good that it can do for individuals.

Mills’ profound thought is that an unwillingness to analyse the structural involves the extinguishing of hope for a better society: “It is a staggering fact that 80,000 hours of our lives will be essentially unfree time; what does 80k’s reliance on this remaining true say about its aspirations to make the world better?” In this, he echoes the observations of Barrie and Myers, who criticise the centre-left of today for accepting too much of the status quo in the name of pragmatism, and so limiting their ability to envisage a utopia to inspire them.

Hobden spots exactly the opposite flaw in the work of academic political philosophers addressing the question of global poverty. She argues that they ought to be more pragmatic: less concerned by the ifs, buts and maybes, less overawed by the complexities of the questions, and more willing to compromise their theoretical purity. She issues a call to arms, observing that “while we continue to debate the outer limits of justice, many of the ‘obvious’ minimum requirements of justice continue to be violated, leaving many in dire poverty while others continue to live in comparative luxury with little regard for this fact”.

Bhattacharya, too, deals with tensions between pragmatism and ideals. He explores the apparent inconsistency between the ideal of cosmopolitanism and the fact that Western welfare states primarily benefit people well off by global standards. He tries to demonstrate that this dilemma evaporates in practice, with a number of contingent facts about public opinion ensuring that more generous welfare states are more likely to benefit the global poor. But he insists that this is merely a temporary tactical alliance, and the deeper philosophical tension is not resolved.

It is the historical reality of global inequality that makes these tensions inevitable. The national unit grows more and more irrelevant as industry, agriculture, commerce, and finance as well as information, science, and culture organise themselves outside the purview of our parochial states, for the benefit of those with power beyond that of any politician. At the same time, the pull of national identity, the notion that charity begins at home and that solidarity is to be found in the celebration of a uniting monarchy or the circus of the Olympic games, has led even some on the left to doubt the importance of internationalism in the fight against oppression. We call for a renewed acknowledgement of a basic truth: no movement can hope to challenge an international hegemony unless it is a movement for the whole world.

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# THE ETHICAL CAREERS DEBATE

## Introduction

by

**Tom Cutterham**

A new Oxford-based organisation, 80,000 Hours, asks people to consider their career choices as ethical decisions. 80k is a spin-off from Giving What We Can, the Peter Singer-endorsed charity which aims to help people increase their giving and direct it to the most effective causes. Both organisations raise the question of what we can do to stand in solidarity with the world's poorest. (See [80000hours.org](http://80000hours.org).)

By connecting this vision with the mechanisms of labour and capital, 80k also raises a more systematic problem. In the face of grave ethical demands, how are our choices structured? Do we face a world where choosing a career is the most important decision we make? Or does this individual dilemma obscure a more complex and perhaps more contingent reality?

## Ben Todd and Sebastian Farquhar

Members of 80,000 Hours believe three simple things. First, it's good to make the lives of others better. Second, your career can be a powerful way to help others. Third, all else being equal, it's better to help more people in bigger ways, than fewer people in smaller ways. This means they attempt to weigh up their career options in terms of how much they are expected to improve the lives of others.

80,000 Hours is not committed to any particular way of making the world better. It's neither for nor against systemic change; neither left wing nor right; neither orientated to the short nor the long term. Indeed, since we are primarily concerned with making the lives of others better, rather than being the ones directly doing the good deeds, we generally consider a much wider range of options than what's typical in 'ethical careers'. For example, the P.A. who saves a great researcher lots of time is also causing more discoveries to be made. And we believe the important thing is that the discoveries are made, not that we make them ourselves. We are interested in picking the path that results in the best outcomes. That's also not to say we'll always take the most altruistic path. Helping others is a significant but not all-consuming priority for our members.

Of course, it's extremely difficult to work out which path is actually best. It turns out, however, that it's possible to make huge improvements, and do far more good than you might have ever expected with only a modest amount of reflection. We reckon it's comparatively easy to save about a thousand lives over the course of your career. That sets an exciting baseline.

This is the key aim of 80k: we want people to think about how their careers can help others. You'll spend over 80,000 hours working, so it could easily be worth spending hundreds of hours thinking about how best to use that time. This is what the 80,000 Hours community aims to help you do.

### **Pete Mills**

This is a fine mission statement. In practice, though, 80,000 Hours has one dominant answer to the problems of the worst-off: in most cases, it turns out the right thing to do will be to embark on a high-paying career, get rich, and donate some of the proceeds to particularly efficient charities. What 80k offers is not neutrality, but a degree of certainty. It gives you a metric, a number – of lives saved – which you can use to evaluate your career choices. In fact, this method makes the ostensibly difficult ethical decision about what to do with your life rather simple. For the vast majority, the best choice proves to be what 80k calls “professional philanthropy”: a long march through the banking institutions. That is the novelty of 80k.

The problem is political. 80k’s avowed neutrality serves to conceal the political logic of its practice. Professional philanthropy does not just involve making your peace with the system – it means embracing it. The unstated imperative: don’t rock the boat. As a banker, or a corporate lawyer, or a management consultant, what enriches you is your position in a set of profoundly exploitative social relations, which we might label capitalism. This may be more or less explicit in the work you do; you don’t have to be rationalising Colonel Gaddafi’s secret police, or speculating on the ability of poor farmers to feed themselves (to take examples from the worlds of consulting and finance) for your work to contribute to global inequalities.

At one level, 80k recognises why these jobs are unethical. The apparent justification for professional philanthropy is that you can do good with your wealth, while the harm you do in the course of your job would happen anyway. But the argument that unethical jobs would continue regardless does not address the link 80k forges between the causes and the remedies of the world’s problems. The good that a professional philanthropist does depends on perpetuating a system which immiserates a vast portion of the world’s population.

The result is a toxic political quietism. As a professional philanthropist, the size of your donations depends on the size of your company’s profits. Your interests are aligned with the interests of capital. Anything that might disrupt production – from taxes on the wealthy at home to a strike of factory workers abroad – is potentially suspect. It is no accident that 80k’s professionalised account of political change is limited to lobbying within the system. 80k refuses the possibility that the right thing to do might not involve your job at all.

In practice, 80k demands the systematic foreclosure of political alternatives. This political quietism is embodied even in the name of the organisation. It is a staggering fact that 80,000 hours of our lives will be essentially unfree time; what does 80k’s reliance on this remaining true say about its aspirations to make the world better?

### **Ben Todd and Sebastian Farquhar**

It isn’t the case that 80k has “one dominant solution” to the problem of choosing a career. Only half of our members are even considering professional philanthropy, and most of them are still weighing up their options. Many instead engage in research or advocacy. Our founder means to be a moral philosopher. One of our members has just given up a well-paid job in the finance sector in favour of movement-building.

We have argued that you can often do more good through professional philanthropy than through a conventional ethical career (such as working for a charity), but not that it's always the best option. A moderately successful professional philanthropist can distribute one million malaria nets, protecting almost two million people from malaria, saving over 2,000 lives, and eliminating the disease in that area. The point is not that this is the best we can achieve. In fact, we think there are often ways you can spend your 80,000 hours that can do more. We are simply pointing out that this is a great deal more than many conventional ethical careers manage – it's an exhortation to pull out all the stops and try for something truly spectacular.

The reply's claim that the good done by a professional philanthropist "depends on perpetuating a system which immiserates a vast portion of the world's population," however, doesn't engage with our argument. For one thing, not all high earning jobs perpetuate capitalism: for instance, becoming a doctor. But even if we restrict ourselves to the most controversial jobs, like being a wheat trader, it's still true that if you don't take the job, someone else will. The job will exist whatever you do, and will probably be filled by someone less ethically minded. So by taking the job you don't obviously perpetuate the system.

Rather than being "aligned with the interests of capital", professional philanthropists are making a strategic choice. They have little impact on the system, but, given how the world is today, are able to improve the lives of millions of people. If they were able to do more by other means, like political campaigning, they would. It's the same choice that Engels made when he chose to work as a factory manager. Engels realised that although he deplored working at the factory, he could do far more good by funding Marx's research, which held the promise of vastly improving the welfare of many more people.

In fact, instead of perpetuating the system, becoming a professional philanthropist is a dramatic, public declaration that you don't support the status quo. In particular, it's a declaration that the wealthy have far more than they need, the poor are desperately poor, and that you're going to do your best to change the situation.

### Pete Mills

The way 80k problematizes what we do with our lives presupposes certain kinds of answers. Once the assumptions which allow the precise calculation of the benefits of professional philanthropy – 2,000 lives saved – are in place, it is difficult to see how 80k's other career suggestions can be much more than an afterthought (save, perhaps, persuading other people to do it). The dubious precision of these calculations and the rhetoric of efficiency obscure the real uncertainty that surrounds these decisions. In practice, if people follow 80k's logic to its conclusion, only those supremely confident in their own abilities will opt for something else.

So let's look at those assumptions. 80k makes much of replaceability: "the job will exist whatever you do." This is stronger than the claim that someone else will become a banker; rather, it states that there will always be bankers, that there will always be exploitation. Nothing can change. This is what I mean when I say professional philanthropy is dependent on perpetuating capitalism. Capitalism is not a policy programme which you are for or against but a set of social relations; taking a low-paid job, or no job at all, does not mean you somehow live outside the system. But

professional philanthropy needs exploitation in order to mitigate the effects of exploitation. That is why it cannot address the causes of the world's problems.

80k collapses the question of what is to be done into the individualist framework of career choice. This is the triumph of philosophy over politics, the ethical over the political. Improving the world turns out to be just another form of labour. But politics is not labour, and no one will replace you if you fail to think, and do, politics. The idea that some jobs are unethical contains the kernel of a politics. But 80k rejects the possibility that you can do something about it.

Are these two approaches mutually exclusive? Perhaps not – after all, Engels combined revolutionary politics with his work as a factory manager. But pursuing a career has costs – Engels was driven to illness, depression and breakdown by his double life. High-impact careers sap our time, energy and limit our political expression. It is naïve to think that today a successful banker could mount an effective political critique of their employer and keep their job. I imagine employers will take 80k as what it is: a declaration that you can tolerate the injustices perpetrated by the current system, as long as it can help you mitigate them.

### **Ben Todd and Sebastian Farquhar**

We don't claim that professional philanthropy is always more effective than campaigning. But if you could fund several campaigners to do the same work, then (other things being equal) you'd do more good than by becoming a salaried campaigner yourself. If there aren't enough equally skilled campaigners to fund, however, then it's better to become the campaigner.

Suppose you've just graduated and need to choose a career. What should you do? 80k would encourage you to think about how much good you can make happen given the various options open to you, and, to a level of sacrifice you can accept, choose the one that does the most good. The reply suggests that this approach "presupposes certain kinds of answers," so that career suggestions other than professional philanthropy are only an "afterthought."

The thought seems to be that the good done by many careers is neither estimable nor comparable. How would you compare the good done by a banker who buys one million malaria nets with a socialist campaigner who develops solidarity between groups of workers? We shouldn't just give up on this problem: it's still better to aim at doing more good rather than less. If the benefits of a career are not even estimable, and if you want to make a difference, what business have you got choosing that career over any other?

The 80k approach emphasises making a difference, and therefore bringing about good that wouldn't have happened otherwise. This means taking account of replaceability. By "the job will exist whatever you do" we mean "the job would exist whatever you choose among the two options being considered – taking the job and not taking it." Of course, there might be some things you could do that would cause the job to cease to exist; for instance, by campaigning against banking. 80k doesn't commit to the absurdly strong position that capitalism will always exist.

The reply says "professional philanthropy needs exploitation," and thus can't make real change. This is making a common mistake. It's true that in a socialist future, there would be no professional philanthropists and no exploitation. But does it follow that we shouldn't become professional

philanthropists now? No, because we're not in the socialist future. To work towards socialism, it might be best to do things that won't be necessary in a socialist future. As we've already noted: Engels became a factory manager in order to enable Marx to write texts about the elimination of factory managers.

Even if you believe capitalism is one of the world's greatest problems, you shouldn't make the seductive inference that you should devote your energies to fighting it. Rather, you should work on the cause that enables you to make the biggest difference. There may be other very big problems which are more tractable. Members of 80k will happily consider the idea that the best way for you to make a difference is through socialist campaigning. But they will also consider other answers. Ultimately, it may be better to work on causes entirely unrelated to fighting capitalism.

### Pete Mills

The language of probability will always fail to capture the possibility of system change. What was the expected value of the civil rights movement, or the campaign for universal suffrage, or anti-colonial struggles for independence? As we have seen most recently with the Arab Spring, every revolution is impossible, until it is inevitable.

The Babylonian calculations that constitute 80k's careers research exclude these possibilities by design. 80k addresses its subject as a participant in exchange, a future employee – and nothing more. The result is a self-fulfilling prophecy of impotence. Without any concept of society as a collective endeavour, we cannot address problems at their root but only those symptoms which are tractable on an atomised, individual level.

This logic is most clearly at work in 80k's account of political change, where in a world of policy advisers, salaried campaigners, and party leaders, politics is just another career. Professionalised politics has failed to address the systemic inequalities of power behind the symptoms that charity tries to alleviate, and this is not just because the politicians aren't ethical enough, nor that NGOs need more money to campaign more effectively. Rather, the failure is also systemic. In the current crisis, this is particularly explicit in governments' avowed powerlessness in the face of the market. It is clear the existing political structure cannot apprehend the workings of capital.

But politics is also a process of contesting what is possible, and it is here 80k acts as a barrier. To compensate for the absence of a collective vehicle for political change, responsibility is shifted to the individual. Poverty is presented to us as an immediate ethical demand which obscures the need for systemic change. Here is the difference between the professional philanthropist and Engels. Engels' patronage of Marx was not an ethical position, but one of expedience. His compromise was temporary; 80k's is permanent. For Engels, revolution did not depend on factory owners realising the need to abolish themselves in response to the needs of some distant mass, but the masses themselves mobilising to reorder society. It is hard to see how this is compatible with paying to do politics by proxy. Engels worked to expose the intolerable nature of capitalism; 80k works to paper over its cracks.

We must question the idea that careers can serve as emancipators. Except for the privileged few, jobs are largely a matter of necessity. 80k, like traditional ethical careers, is an attempt to avoid confronting our complicity in systematic exploitation. Instead, the first step to social change might

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be for people to clearly and soberly see their jobs for what they are, do, and sustain, and work from there. The freedom graduates from elite universities have to choose a career is predicated on the lack of choice for the many. The idea that those who are not yoked to the machine for their 80,000 hours must instead discharge them out of moral duty is the product of a stunted political imagination. Why should the 80,000 hour career survive the march of technological progress at all?

*Ben Todd is the co-founder and Managing Director of 80,000 Hours. He is in his fourth year, reading Physics and Philosophy at Balliol College, and wrote his thesis on the ethics of the replaceability issue in career choice.*

*Sebastian Farquhar is a member of 80,000 Hours and Giving What We Can. He is in his final year studying Physics and Philosophy at Balliol.*

*Pete Mills studied politics and sociology at Oxford and LSE. He graduated from Somerville College in 2009.*

# PROBLEMATIZING WOMEN'S MICROFINANCE IN FEMINIST THEORIES OF GLOBAL JUSTICE

Cailin Crockett

Since Muhammad Yunus founded Grameen Bank and the modern microfinance phenomenon in 1976, development economists have been impressed by the powerful statistics behind successful loan repayment and correlated increases in wellbeing among female credit borrowers. Despite numerous attempts to evaluate the degree to which microfinance “empowers” women, however, there has been little discussion among feminist theorists as to whether the values behind microcredit schemes are explicitly supportive of sex equality at their core. This essay critically evaluates the extent to which microcredit offers a “real” challenge to the gendered terms of global poverty, and why pockets of the feminist community have been reluctant to embrace it.

Despite the initial praise earned by microcredit programmes for women, development economists, gender theorists, and policymakers are now debating the extent to which microfinance offers a path out of poverty. Some of the most compelling rebuttals question whether the Grameen strategy actually gives women access to an alternative financial system. Rehman Sobhan, a Bangladeshi economist and advisor to the Grameen Bank, does not deny the transformative power of the institution but asserts that loan programmes actually operate to pacify the concerns of the marginalized without contesting the injustice of the overall system. “Microfinance is ghettoized,” he explains, because it does not pose a tangible challenge to the business-as-usual of the global market.<sup>1</sup> He raises the important concern that programmes such as Grameen allow the state to evade responsibility for the welfare of the poor by relying on non-governmental organizations to fill the gap.

Sobhan’s critique parallels what is perhaps the most cited feminist charge against microfinance: that, in attempting to challenge the injustices caused and exacerbated by global capitalism, microloans valorise the agency of the individual to “lift herself up” from poverty through credit, thus avoiding any ideological divorce from neoliberalism. The underlying argument is that it is impossible for any practice to fundamentally contest the corruption of a system while operating within the same basic paradigm. As some feminist critics have suggested, national governments and international organizations have promoted microcredit because it “fits nicely with the prevailing ideology that defines poverty as an individual problem and that shifts responsibility for addressing it away from government policy-makers and multilateral bank managers onto the backs of poor women.”<sup>2</sup> Central to this scepticism is how microcredit functions as an effective dismissal of the roles played by global institutions and policies in constructing an economy that thrives on competition and inequality. Feminists are right to worry about the counterproductivity of lending schemes’ efforts to empower poor women *as individuals*; in so doing, the poor as a group seem to be disempowered to demand structural responses from the state.

Nancy Fraser addresses the contradictions with feminist goals inherent to microfinance programmes: “Counterposing feminist values of empowerment and participation from below to the passivity-inducing red tape of top-down étatism, the architects of these [microfinance] projects have crafted an innovative synthesis of self-help and community networking, NGO oversight and market mechanisms – all aimed at combating women’s poverty and gender subjection.”<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the provision of capital to poor women, with its (practical and theoretical) potential to promote women’s self-esteem and political agency, is clearly in line with “feminist values of empowerment and participation,” as Fraser notes. On the other, the local dimensions of microfinance projects suggest that they are removed from larger efforts to change the modus operandi of the global economy, which creates pockets of wealth for few and pools of poverty for many; such a disconnect places far too much emphasis on individual responsibility, and not nearly enough on the role of state and international actors in determining who wins and who loses in the neoliberal game. This criticism is apprehensive of the capacity of economic programs to empower individuals, because the success or failure of the model ultimately becomes the responsibility of those persons it aims to serve. Sceptics of microfinance accordingly contend that the tenets of capitalism are inimical to notions of universal wellbeing, and that confusion surrounding the pros and cons of microcredit “simply underline[s] a dilemma that confronts any endeavor to salvage capitalism by trying to shift its purposes toward human welfare.”<sup>4</sup>

Common to the above concerns is a fundamental question of political theory: to what extent should the state provide goods and services to its people, and how can the matter of justice be properly integrated into a consideration of what is meant by “goods and services”? This enquiry is at the heart of feminist thought: the state has served as both enemy and ally; on the one hand, to officially exclude women;<sup>5</sup> on the other, to provide safeguards for their full and equal protection and participation. A strand of liberalism adopted by feminists in the tradition of J.S. Mill, among others, “insists on an active role for the state in creating the material and institutional prerequisites of positive freedom.”<sup>6</sup> In terms of supporting policies such as the Millennium Development Goals for human rights (of which prioritizing women’s livelihoods is one), this perspective is valuable in that it “generat[es] positive obligations for state action to support human wellbeing and develop individual and group capacities.”<sup>7</sup> Because Grameen Bank operates expressly outside the government sector, liberal feminists have cause to object to microfinance for women, which steps in to fill the gap where the state has abdicated its responsibilities. Those who criticize microfinance along such lines object to Grameen’s *de facto* replacement of the state as a provider of welfare for reinforcing “the free market ideology’s foundation in the separative self, or the autonomy of rational individuals.”<sup>8</sup> They problematize the efforts of microcredit organizations to deliver marginalized communities access to capital because it conflicts with the feminist understanding of the state “as the institutional expression of the ways in which people value other people [and] have ethical significance for each other.”<sup>9</sup> According to this view, microfinance schemes are doubly counterproductive: they negate the role of the state in promoting the redistribution of resources to disenfranchised groups, and their emphasis on individuals’ ability to advance themselves through participating in the market effectively promotes the neoliberal principles of competition and profit maximization over a feminist ethic of care.

Given this clash of values, it would appear that women’s microfinance is symbolic of an ideo-

logical battleground between neoliberalism and feminist theory. The divergence between the two approaches is well-articulated in a report commissioned by the UN on gender and development, which states: “The idea of ‘negative liberty’, prevalent in much Western liberalism and re-inscribed at the heart of neoliberalism, suggests that rights are primarily protections *against* state interference.”<sup>10</sup> By contrast, feminist political theory asserts the opposite, maintaining that the state ought to be the site of collective action for the advancement of human welfare.<sup>11</sup> A further indictment of microfinance – that the type of work microcredit supports takes place within the unregulated, informal economy – again demonstrates the incompatibilities between neoliberal and feminist agendas. As one critic comments, “these [microcredit] enterprises are almost all in the informal sector, which is fiercely competitive and typically unregulated... outside the range of any laws that protect workers or ensure their rights.”<sup>12</sup> This concern runs back to the core critique of microfinance: the non-existence of regulatory measures to defend workers’ rights is equivalent to the absence of the state.

While the neoliberal mindset applauds a lack of regulation as the best way to ensure the ability of the individual to accrue capital, the feminist approach is concerned with the likelihood that the rights of vulnerable groups will be exploited without state intervention. In the worse case scenario, feminists might argue that microfinance programmes such as Grameen not only enable government disengagement from the needs of the poor, but also lead to the financial exploitation of borrowers who are caught in a cycle of debt and cannot repay their loans. Otherwise, microfinance programmes represent a case for the second best: if it is truly the case that NGOs offering microcredit serve the poor where the state (the ideal provider) is not able, then the feminist theorist will insist that the current economic system is far beyond the capacity of small-scale efforts at repair. In that circumstance, what little good microfinance organizations may do is outweighed by the harm they cause as a distraction from holistic efforts to address the corruption of the global economy.

Drucilla Barker and Susan Feiner, authors of *Liberating Economics*, critique microfinance for disingenuously providing a positive spin on neoliberalism. They sharply contend: “Grameen Bank founder Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize because his approach to banking reinforces the neoliberal view that individual behavior is the source of poverty... Do these programs help some women ‘pull themselves up by the bootstraps’? Yes. Will micro-enterprises in the informal sector contribute to ending world poverty? Not a chance.”<sup>13</sup> This indictment of microcredit stresses that while loans can be empowering for exceptional cases of individual borrowers, the general rule is that lending to the poor at the grassroots does nothing to alter the structural conditions that drive women to the informal sector. They acknowledge that lending programmes do provide their clients with some material gains, but codify these as short-term victories that undermine efforts to make a long-term impact on poverty rates in developing countries.

In light of these criticisms, the most reasoned defences of microfinance explain that lending programmes were never meant as a panacea for global poverty, but rather developed as a humble attempt to empower the poor at the grassroots level. As several proponents argue, “Microfinance is not a stand-alone activity, but a strategy to contribute to development.”<sup>14</sup> Surely, however, the Grameen approach can be recognized for its modest contributions to local struggles against the unjust ways in which poverty targets the most vulnerable segments

of the population. The hope is that, in offering poor women access to credit, increased income will lead to “further livelihood improvements [such as] asset building, better health and education facilities.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, since many organizations focus on women and use credit as a means for their empowerment, microfinance contributes to mainstreaming the understanding that unequal gender relations are a fundamental cause of the persistence of poverty. A concrete example of how microfinance enhances the status of women is the evidence that borrowers are significantly more likely to practice family planning.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Yunus refers to this fact as one of the great successes of his project.<sup>17</sup> The marked correlation between borrowers’ economic empowerment and the increased practice of family planning recalls contemporary feminist theories regarding the importance of women’s right to engage in reflection about the planning of one’s life.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, microcredit merits feminist support, particularly since one of most potent sites of struggle for women’s emancipation has been (and continues to be) over the use and control of our bodies.

Given such powerful examples of the role of credit in promoting women’s agency, it becomes apparent that the feminist community has difficulty rallying behind microfinance because it highlights a question that divides feminist theory itself: is equality best served by emphasising women’s rights *as individuals*, in the liberal tradition, or by arguing for their status *as a group* that has been subjected to historical inequalities? In its own way, the Grameen lending scheme can be interpreted as an attempt to combine both approaches, through its insistence on borrowers’ individual capacity to escape poverty once shown the resources, in addition to its promotion of group-based loan networks. The liberal feminist view, well represented by Nussbaum’s work on human capabilities, places emphasis on the distribution of resources and opportunities to each individual. Nussbaum bases her argument on the fact that, “Given how often women are treated as members of families, communities and nations and their interests are subordinated to the larger goal of these entities...what they need is more, not less, liberal individualism.”<sup>19</sup> Rather, she contends, “They need to be seen, and to see themselves, as autonomous, free human beings capable of making their own choices.”<sup>20</sup>

Such a perspective conflicts with the critical feminist notion of social rights, as opposed to the rights of the individual. Whereas individual-based rights claims stress the importance of negative freedom,<sup>21</sup> arguments for group-based social rights emphasize equality as the primary ingredient of justice. Anne Phillips’ characterization of liberal theory is helpful in explaining this dichotomy. She writes, “Liberalism places individual freedoms at the heart of its analysis, and is driven principally by a commitment to free choice.”<sup>22</sup> This commitment, certain feminists argue, is incompatible with social justice projects dedicated to advocating for the interests of underrepresented groups. Their contention is that “Neoliberal appropriations of rights discourses as the guarantors of free enterprise stand in opposition to the idea of social rights...”<sup>23</sup>

Considering the contrast between both viewpoints, it is plausible that some feminists are reluctant to endorse microfinance for women because the redistribution element inherent in lending programmes like Grameen is limited. The language and practice of microcredit suggests that its guiding philosophy may resemble Nussbaum’s notion that all individuals deserve a basic minimum of resources and rights, rather than being motivated by a commitment to equality, or a recognition of the historical struggles of some groups to realize equal treatment. An important theoretical point to consider is that the concern with poverty expressed by organizations

combating the income disparities caused by globalization does not necessarily equate to a disagreement with inequality per se; nor is a desire to lessen the gap in global wealth synonymous with a regard for equality as intrinsically valuable. Perhaps in part because the microfinance model is too conservative in its reliance on market-based capitalism and its faith in the ability of individuals to pull themselves out of poverty, its ability to radically contest gender relations is undermined; meanwhile, radical change is precisely what is needed, particularly in the deeply patriarchal societies where microcredit organizations set up shop.

There is undoubtedly a powerful strain in feminist political theory that is distrustful of the ability of macrostructures to incorporate the particular experiences of women; yet this mistrust would suggest an orientation towards micro-level approaches, such as microcredit. The most biting and insightful criticisms of microfinance are aware of this conundrum. Rather than considering Grameen Bank's particular attention to women as a real challenge to the universalizing tendencies of liberal discourse, they conceptualize microcredit's emphasis on individual agency as corroborating the neoliberal credo that denies structural accounts of global injustice. Such critics argue that microfinance is too full of its own contradictions to be a credible project for women's empowerment in the long term; they insist that because the feminization of poverty is caused by the intersectionality of institutions laden with gender discrimination, it is not only unfeasible, but epistemologically irrational, to combat structurally-caused injustice with short-term gains in the grassroots.

On the other hand, the theory behind these criticisms is fraught with its own inconsistencies. Feminist political philosophy offers a powerful indictment of the role that macrostructures play in creating and reinforcing women's inferior status. Yet, with calls for the state to take an active part in redressing such injustice through recognition and redistribution projects, the message seems to be that the problem must be a part of the solution. Of course, there must always be a place for the critical analysis of programmes that purport to be supportive of women's agency but appear too good to be true upon further scrutiny. In this respect, feminist theory will always play an essential role. Nonetheless, the concrete improvements in women's quality of life made possible by microcredit programmes like Grameen Bank, though limited in their capacity to eliminate global gender disparities, are local instances of social justice that merit feminists' support.

*Cailin Crockett is studying for an M. Phil. in Political Theory at St Cross College, Oxford.*

1 Sobhan, *Challenging the Injustice of Poverty*, p. iv.

2 Susan F. Feiner and Drucilla K. Barker. "Microcredit and Women's Poverty: Granting This Year's Nobel Peace Prize to Microcredit Guru Muhammad Yunus Affirms Neoliberalism", *Dollars and Sense*, November/December 2006, p. 268.

3 Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History", *New Left Review*, Vol. 56, March 2009, pp. 111-112

4 Wendy Lynne Lee, *Contemporary Feminist Theory and Activism: Six Global Issues*, (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2010, pp. 116-117

5 See Carole Pateman's discussion in *The Sexual Contract*, for example.

6 Maxine Molyneux & Shahra Razavi, "Gender Justice, Development and Rights", (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development: Democracy, Governance and Human Rights Programme Paper No. 10, January 2003), p. 7

7 *Ibid.*

8 Graham Dawson and Sue Hatt, *Market, State and Feminism: The Economics of Feminist Policy*, (Cheltenham, UK:

Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2000), p. 14.

9        *Ibid.*

10      Molyneux & Razavi, “Gender Justice, Development and Rights,” p. 6.

11      Dawson & Hatt, *Market, State and Feminism*, p. 19.

12      Feiner & Barker, “Microcredit & Women’s Poverty”

13      Feiner & Barker, “Microcredit & Women’s Poverty”

14      Sally Baden, “Social Impact Measurement”, (Oxfam International & International Network of Alternative Financial Institutions Working Paper Series, April 2006) p. 4.

15      *Ibid.*, p. 4.

16      April Allen Watson & Christopher Dunford, *From Microfinance to Macro Change: Integrating Microfinance and Health Education to Empower Women and Reduce Poverty*, (New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2006), p. 4.

17      “The Grameen Bank is often cited in population discussions because the adoption of family planning measures among Grameen families is twice the national rate of Bangladesh... it was also noted that birth rates among Grameen families is significantly lower than the national average.” Yunus, *Banker to the Poor*, p. 134.

18      See Martha Nussbaum, “Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings”, in Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover, *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

19      Martha Nussbaum, as quoted in Molyneux & Razavi, “Gender Justice, Development and Rights”, p. 7.

20      *Ibid.*

21      By “negative freedom” I mean protection against interference from rights infringements, or the idea that one is free *from* harm, rather than free *to* access an education, for example.

22      Anne Phillips, “Introduction”, in Anne Phillips, ed., *Feminism & Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xi.

23      Molyneux & Razavi, “Gender Justice, Development and Rights”, p. 32.

# GLOBAL JUSTICE: ESTABLISHING COMMON GROUND

Christine Hobden

The global justice debate is as extensive as it is contentious. Any number of important questions are analysed, ranging from the practical issues of poverty alleviation to the philosophical foundations of justice itself. One of the central questions discussed in this debate is the question of where the outer limits of justice fall; are duties of justice limited just to our compatriots, or do they extend to those in countries across the globe? These questions have become increasingly pressing as the nature of contemporary society has changed. Few states have ever existed in isolation and so interstate interaction is not something that is new in itself. There have however been at least two important shifts. The first is that the extent of these interactions has greatly increased. States co-operate on shared challenges such as climate change, and make joint decisions in the United Nations (UN) on how to deal with issues such as human rights abuses in other states. In addition, states collaborate to form international laws on intellectual property and other trade related issues. The extent of global trade means that the products that one buys at a local supermarket are likely to come from countries all over the world, and economic fluctuations have effects far beyond the borders of the country in which they originate.<sup>1</sup>

Importantly, this begins to highlight the second shift, the shift in the underlying attitude of states and their citizens towards other states and their citizens. Previously, the ‘other’ was, for the most part, either an enemy to be fought with, or an inferior to be exploited. Interstate interactions are now, at least officially, governed by a recognition of principles such as the right to self-determination and the equal moral worth of humans. This more sympathetic view of other states and their populations, in combination with the increasing interdependence of states has pushed the question of the extent to which justice is owed to these individuals into prominence. Yet despite this more favourable basis for international interaction, it is arguable that Kant’s statement still rings true; ‘Nowhere does human nature appear less lovable than in the relations of whole nations to each other.’<sup>2</sup> International interactions continue to show signs of severe power imbalances, and poverty, inequality, and exploitation remain.

In short, while the world is growing closer in terms of interaction and association, it still, on many occasions, falls short of any sort of meaningful solidarity. In this short essay, I will focus on the issue of global poverty and inequality as an example of an area where a unified approach is desperately needed but has not yet been attained. This issue raises numerous important questions about the behaviour of international organizations, national governments and non-governmental organizations, but in this essay I will focus primarily on the lack of a unified response from political theorists. I will argue that while there is extensive debate in political theory around the scope of global justice, there is also more solidarity that we, as theorists, could and should be highlighting. I suggest that a more cohesive view on the core of global justice can serve to provide a basis from which to approach the task of remedying global

injustice: both in tackling questions of responsibility and the prioritization of tasks. In the heat of this very contentious debate on global justice the focus tends to be on the areas of disagreement with little, if any, acknowledgment of agreement. This could be because, as Swift and White put it, ‘what is wrong about the most serious wrongs in the world is often so obvious that there is little of normative interest to say about them.’<sup>3</sup> In the area of global justice however, this view can be problematic because as Murphy describes: ‘on the question of required beneficence, people not only tend to be uncertain, but also appear to be quite content about this condition of uncertainty.’<sup>4</sup> I suggest that this is a mistake on our behalf: while we continue to debate the outer limits of justice, many of the ‘obvious’ minimum requirements of justice continue to be violated, leaving many in dire poverty while others continue to live in comparative luxury with little regard for this fact. Global justice scholars are involved in so many different and intractable arguments that it is difficult to imagine agreement on the overall task. While there is merit in philosophical debate, and importance in fully articulating a theory of global justice, the urgency of the issue of global injustice precludes these activities from being our central focus. Wolff has argued, in his discussion of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, that while we may have wished it used a different kind of language or was written in a different order, we need to recognize the value of finding a level of consensus among people from differing religious, philosophical, cultural, ideological and national backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> In addition, we should note how this level of consensus allowed the UN to begin to realize these principles in international law.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, I suggest that agreeing upon the core of global justice will allow us to begin to address the issues of severe poverty and inequality with the urgency they require. The further questions of where responsibility lies and so who should be taking action can be a more central focus and inform practical solutions to the problem. I do not intend to undermine the value of the global justice debate but instead suggest that where our equivocation leads to inaction it is crucial for theorists to be clear on those principles that are shared, and to thus allow for the further questions of responsibility and action to be pursued from a shared base. I argue that at the core of global justice there are minimum requirements to which most theorists would agree despite their differing views on where the outer limit lies. I suggest that there are at least three such requirements that we could agree upon, and which for the most part appear to be violated in contemporary times.

The first, and perhaps most fundamental, is the fulfilment of the human right to basic human necessities. This includes basic sanitation, food, housing and healthcare.<sup>7</sup> Shue argues that subsistence at this level should be a basic human right; what he defines as a ‘rational basis for a justified demand that the actual enjoyment of a substance be socially guaranteed against standard threats.’<sup>8</sup> Importantly, I suggest it is one of the minimum requirements of global justice that this right be fulfilled, rather than just existing in the abstract. A second minimum requirement that I propose is that there be fair terms of co-operation between international actors. It seems that, as a matter of justice, it is important that there is not institutionalized exploitation — the wealthy using their influence to gain more wealth at the cost of the less powerful. While economics in a capitalist system is always going to lead to more and less powerful actors it is important that these interactions and the laws that govern them should remain transparent and free of corruption. Lastly, and least controversially, I think it is a minimum requirement of global justice that states do not act harmfully against one another, either through military force or any other coercive means. There are obviously going to be cases of warranted use of force, such as in self-defence. Here I refer only to those specific cases whereby the harm is unwar-

ranted and normally carried out purely for the advantage of the perpetrating state. When, and to what extent, harm is warranted is not always obvious and so it will, at times, be difficult to specify if this requirement of justice has been fulfilled or not. There is extensive debate on the nature of harm and when its use is warranted, if ever. Given the scope of my project, I will not be entering this debate and so will not be dealing with the specific issue of how to determine when harm is unwarranted, but rather will argue that when it does occur, unwarranted use of harm violates the minimum requirements of global justice.

The list of minimum requirements of global justice would therefore include: (i) the duty to fulfil the human right to basic human necessities; (ii) the duty to keep the terms of international co-operation fair; and (iii) the duty not to harm others and to pay reparation if one has. I do not think that this is a controversial list. Yet even if contention arises, my focus does not lie in the nature of the specific duties on the list but rather in the potential for consensus; the idea that when we delve into the issue of justice there will be some very basic minimums which most scholars would agree form a part of a theory of global justice.

This is not the forum for an extensive analysis of the work of global justice scholars, and their ability to agree with these requirements. Instead, I will briefly point to a range of theorists whose positions vary quite distinctly yet still seem to have great potential to agree on core issues. Peter Singer, for example, runs a consequentialist argument that holds that ‘if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, *without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance*, we ought, morally to do it’.<sup>9</sup> While this consequentialist view may sit uncomfortably with a set of minimum requirements of global justice, if we consider the things Singer considers as ‘bad’, it becomes apparent he would endorse the minimums I have suggested. His work extensively illustrates the ‘bad’ of, among other things, extreme poverty and a lack of basic necessities, and the problems of power imbalances and the resulting unfair negotiations.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, we could consider David Miller, who holds a nationalist position and so advocates that ‘we do not owe [the world’s poor] everything that we owe our compatriots as a matter of social justice’.<sup>11</sup> Importantly however, Miller does hold that we owe everyone basic human rights. In addition, he has argued against exploitation and unfair terms of co-operation, and has done extensive analysis on the need to rectify past harms.<sup>12</sup> Despite his opposition to ‘global justice’ as it were, Miller could still endorse the minimum requirements I have suggested. Similarly, Michael Blake holds a nationalist view and advocates that it is not incompatible with a global impartial theory to hold that we should have distinct distributive principles within the state. This is because of the political and legal institutions we share at the national level ‘create a need for distinct forms of justification.’<sup>13</sup> Yet importantly, Blake is committed to principles of sufficiency globally, and a concern for the absolute deprivation of individuals regardless of their domicile.<sup>14</sup> It is not the fact of inequality but the fact of poverty that would concern Blake on the international stage — this does however suggest that he would be likely to buy into a set of *minimum* requirements of justice that are absolute rather than relative.

Others are perhaps more obviously likely to support these principles: for example, Daniel Butt’s theory of rectifying international injustice shows strong support for the view that states should not harm each other, as well as the need for fair terms of co-operation.<sup>15</sup> In addition, he speaks of the tragedy that transnational duties to ensure minimal levels of well-being for

the world's poor are not being fulfilled, indicating his likely commitment to the minimum requirement of a human right to basic necessities.<sup>16</sup> Gillian Brock is another example of a global justice scholar who would most likely agree to the suggested minimum requirements. Her theory is cosmopolitan but 'leaves scope for a defensible form of nationalism.'<sup>17</sup> Importantly, when describing her model, she puts emphasis on needs and argues that all should be enabled to meet basic needs as well as to have their basic liberties protected and to be offered fair terms of co-operation in collective endeavours.<sup>18</sup> Simon Caney, also a cosmopolitan, holds that all persons have a human right to basic subsistence as one of his four core principles, as well as speaking out against exploitation and unequal opportunity.<sup>19</sup> It seems clear that these theories would support the duties to ensure the human right to basic necessities, fair terms of co-operation, and non-harm. While this is only a very brief look at a small sample of global justice scholars, I think it illustrates that there are important areas of overlap among scholars despite the fierce level of disagreement.

If this consensus on the minimum requirements of global justice can be established, it seems imperative that it should be emphasized rather than forgotten. While the global justice debate is by no means redundant because of it, it seems to add significant importance to the pursuit of further questions of distributing responsibility and methods to achieve these minimum requirements. It highlights that while there is great intellectual merit in philosophical debate rather than discussion of the 'obvious', in issues of such great import as global poverty, we should pause the debate briefly every now and then, to emphasize to ourselves, and others, that there are some basic minimums that we all agree upon, but are daily failing to fulfil.

*Christine Hobden is studying for an M. Phil. in Political Theory at St Antony's College, Oxford.*

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4 Murphy, Liam B. *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 3.

5 Wolff, Jonathan. 'The Demands of the Human Right to Health.' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*. (forthcoming):3.

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10 See, for example, Singer, *The life you can save*, 5-9.

11 Miller, David. *National Responsibility and Global Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 231.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Blake, Michael. 'Distributive Justice, State Coercion, and Autonomy.' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2001):258.

14 *Ibid.*, 258, 259.

15 Butt, Daniel. *Rectifying International Injustice: Principles of Compensation and Restitution between Nations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 66.

16 Butt, Daniel. 'Victors' Justice? Historic Injustice and the Legitimacy of International Law.' In *Legitimacy, Justice and Public International Law*, ed., Lukas H. Meyer: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 1.

17 Brock, Gillian. *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 4.

18 *Ibid.*, 45.

19 Caney, Simon. *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 122.

# CAN GLOBAL EGALITARIANS DEFEND THE WELFARE STATE?

Aveek Bhattacharya

Egalitarians often see the welfare state as the obvious vehicle for their principles. But its beneficiaries are relatively affluent by international standards. For example, an average household in the bottom 5% of the French income distribution will be among the richest 28% of humanity.<sup>1</sup> From a global perspective, the welfare state redistributes from the super-rich to the upper middle class.

A number of egalitarians have spotted this potential tension in their thought without exploring it fully. For example, Stuart White believes that a “cluster of issues around global and intergenerational justice is likely to become as important as the classical debates between left and right on the justice of the welfare state”.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Robert Goodin notes that “it is logically very difficult indeed not to be drawn ‘beyond the welfare state’ and extend similar protections to the needy worldwide”.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, different political theorists have developed a strong defence of the idea that egalitarian concerns should not be limited to nation states. This view, known as global egalitarianism, holds that material inequalities between individuals in different nations are morally problematic.

This opportunity to discomfit egalitarians has not escaped the notice of those on the right. Sam Bowman, of the libertarian think tank The Adam Smith Institute, exploits it to bait his ideological opponents:

support for a welfare state in the UK is wrongheaded even if you believe that a welfare state is a good way of combating poverty. If throwing money at people improves their long-run living standards, the left should oppose a welfare state in Britain and want to direct *all* social spending to the developing world.<sup>4</sup>

Bowman goes too far in suggesting global egalitarians are committed to dismantling the entire welfare state – this would inevitably lead to people in places like the UK becoming impoverished even by global standards. The real question is whether global egalitarians can support more generous welfare provision in affluent countries (like the UK) than elsewhere. If not, this would certainly imply dramatic cuts to Western welfare states, such as Britain’s.

In this article, I want to argue that even if global inequality renders welfare states as generous as those of Western countries morally unjustifiable in principle, global egalitarians still have pragmatic reasons to defend them.<sup>5</sup> Given certain contingent facts about public opinion in developed countries, bigger welfare states are associated with support for measures that benefit the global poor. I take three measures in turn – aid, trade and migration – and explain (i) how each of these contributes to mitigating global inequality, and (ii) how each of these is associated with larger welfare states.

**Aid**

The question of whether foreign aid helps the global poor is so disputed that the study of aid effectiveness has become a field in itself within development economics. It is often hard for outsiders to make sense of the mutually contradictory findings that regularly emanate from it,<sup>6</sup> but there are a few general points that can be made against aid sceptics. Firstly, though many doubt whether aid has a positive influence, there is hardly any evidence that aid, taken as a whole, has been harmful.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the aid effectiveness literature takes a particularly narrow view of success – economic growth is the most common metric. That aid has had a positive non-economic impact independent of its direct economic effects is relatively clear. Aid has financed successful health interventions, such as the eradication of smallpox.<sup>8</sup> It was instrumental in supporting the ‘green revolution’ and so feeding the world’s poorest. It has contributed to raising education levels.<sup>9</sup> Thirdly, though it remains controversial, there is reasonable evidence to suggest that aid has, in fact, produced economic growth.<sup>10</sup> This result is especially strong when we account for the fact that not all aid is intended to boost economic output.<sup>11</sup> Fourthly, there is the expectation that aid will become more effective as practitioners gain a better understanding of what does and does not work.<sup>12</sup> Thus while much of the evidence remains inconclusive, we should still expect global egalitarians to favour increased foreign aid.

A few political scientists have explored the connection between a country’s welfare state and its contribution to foreign aid. A common finding is that bigger welfare states tend to give more aid.<sup>13</sup> Yet this is insufficient to establish a causal connection – it does not show that countries give more aid *because* they have a bigger welfare state.

There are a number of ways this relationship might be explained. A third factor might cause both high welfare expenditure and high aid donation. For example, a strong commitment to egalitarianism would apply the same logic to domestic and international inequality. Confidence in the effectiveness of state intervention would also explain both. These underlying values may well be independent of existing institutions. However, it has also been suggested that political values are often conditioned by the norms embodied in existing institutions.<sup>14</sup> It could be that the welfare state develops an egalitarian ethos which spreads from the domestic sphere to the international.<sup>15</sup>

These static background factors might help explain the relationship between the welfare state and foreign aid, but there may also be dynamic factors, brought into play by changes to welfare or aid spending. The idea that welfare and foreign aid spending could ‘crowd each other out’ is implausible – aid never constitutes more than a tiny proportion of government spending. Yet it is well established that citizens of rich countries vastly overestimate how much their governments spend on foreign aid.<sup>16</sup> If 25% of the US government’s budget really was spent on aid, as the average American thinks, then greater welfare spending would be much more likely to necessitate cuts to foreign aid. Thus cutting the welfare state may well make foreign aid seem more affordable, and therefore more popular.

At the same time, many people have the view that the government has obligations to look after its own people first and foremost, and that foreign aid is only acceptable once a basic standard of living is secured for all citizens. The global egalitarian may disagree violently with these

values, and seek to change them, but if they are pragmatic, they must account for their existence. On this view, the less discontent there is with the adequacy of the state's provision for its own citizens, the more support there will be for the state assisting foreigners.

The evidence offers most support for this last hypothesis. Using survey data, Noel and Therien find that support for international redistribution is strongest in those countries where there is least demand for further domestic redistribution i.e. where people are most satisfied with existing welfare institutions.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, the countries that most favoured more domestic redistribution tended to be against increasing foreign aid, and were often the countries with the least social protection. Noel and Therien suggest that this is because inequality is less of a concern in more equal countries with a great deal of state intervention in place.

The extreme cases of Denmark and France illustrate the point. Denmark, with the most generous welfare state and lowest inequality in the OECD, showed little appetite for further redistribution. Only 67% of respondents thought something should be done about Danish inequality – the lowest in the sample. At the same time, 89% of Danes thought more should be done to help the global poor. By contrast, those proportions were almost exactly reversed in France – 91% calling for greater domestic redistribution compared to 67% wanting more international redistribution.

The lesson that Noel and Therien draw from this is that mass publics “support international redistribution more strongly when principles of justice have been institutionalized domestically and when poverty has been tackled at home, and less strongly in the absence of such principles and achievements”.<sup>18</sup> Extensive domestic redistribution seems to be a popular precondition of increasing foreign aid. Global egalitarians therefore have good reason to defend the welfare state since it is necessary to maintaining public support for foreign aid.

## Trade

The role of trade in poverty alleviation is another controversial issue, but most of the controversy relates to the question of whether poor countries ought to open their economies to world markets. However, this is not the relevant question for our purposes – we are concerned with the policies of rich countries. It is much less debatable that the protectionism of developed countries harms the global poor. Tariffs and subsidies keep the global poor out of lucrative markets. They depress world prices, and increase market volatility. Worse, agriculture and textiles, where poor countries have a comparative advantage, tend to be the most protected markets. Moreover, these are particularly significant sectors for employment – 70% of Africans are farmers.<sup>19</sup>

Various estimates have been made of the concrete cost of maintaining these barriers. Cline suggests that the removal of industrial country agricultural subsidies and protections could reduce global poverty by 8%.<sup>20</sup> It is estimated that a similar move for textiles would be worth \$23.8 billion a year to developing countries.<sup>21</sup> Farmers of just one crop in one region – cotton growers in Francophone Africa – are believed to have lost \$700 million as a result of artificially depressed prices caused by subsidies.<sup>22</sup> It has been suggested that “For every \$3 that the EU

gives Mozambique in aid, it takes back \$1 through restrictions on access to its sugar market".<sup>23</sup>

A few poor countries could be harmed by the removal of certain trade barriers, at least in the short run. For example, Mauritius benefits from its privileged access to the inflated prices of the EU sugar market.<sup>24</sup> Net importers of food might be squeezed by the higher prices resulting from the withdrawal of subsidies. However, those who stand to lose – those in cities and relatively industrialised economies – are vastly outnumbered by, and generally better off than, those who stand to gain.<sup>25</sup> It is fairly safe to say, then, that trade liberalisation in rich countries would help reduce global inequality.

Larger welfare states have been associated with trade liberalisation for three reasons.<sup>26</sup> Firstly, they stabilise expectations. The more dependent a person is on the market for their income – especially volatile global markets – the greater their potential losses from free trade are likely to be, and so the more risk averse they are likely to be. The safety net of the welfare state means that international trade is no longer seen as a fundamental danger to our standard of living, but as an opportunity. Secondly, the welfare state offers the possibility of compensating the 'losers' of globalisation. Those whose incomes fall can be assured of recouping some of their losses in the shape of state benefits. Moreover, they can also be sure of receiving support, like education and retraining. According to Peter Katzenstein, this was the conscious policy of many European countries: Sweden, Austria and the Netherlands sought to "complement their pursuit of liberalism in the international economy with a strategy of domestic compensation".<sup>27</sup> Finally, the welfare state ensures a greater role in the economy for the government, allowing it to act as a counterweight to the vicissitudes of the market. In a turbulent open economy, the state sector might be seen as 'safe', a reliable source of employment and spending, which can step in should demand and employment fall in the rest of the economy.

Dani Rodrik offers empirical support for these theoretical claims.<sup>28</sup> He finds that more open economies have greater state expenditure, and that this relationship is robust, independent of income, region, size, political values and a number of other variables. Not only does the association hold cross-sectionally, it also holds over time: countries that were more open in 1960 were likely to have a bigger state sector in the next three decades. State spending is also related to the riskiness of trade: countries with more volatile terms of trade tend to have bigger welfare states. Rodrik also finds that while general government spending seemed to be the main tool in developing countries, variation in welfare spending explained most of the variation in openness among members of the OECD. According to his estimates, in the average country, a 10% increase in trade volume as a proportion of GDP is associated with an increase in welfare spending of 0.8% of GDP. There is also support for the theory that the government acts as a safe sector of the economy – a small increase in government spending tends to reduce income instability.

Rodrik only suggests that the direction of causation runs from trade openness to welfare spending, and not the other way around. In other words, he argues that more open countries are likely to develop bigger welfare states, but not necessarily that bigger welfare states are likely to become more open. However, this does not seem like an unreasonable extension of his argument and data – it is not contradicted by anything he says. The two processes certainly seem to occur close together. If welfare spending is seen as compensation for greater openness

to trade, then it is not unreasonable to suggest that greater spending would leave people more willing to accept lower trade barriers, or that less spending would lead to demands to erect higher barriers. There is no reason why compensation cannot be provided in anticipation of openness. Indeed, this is sequence of events found in many countries surveyed by Molana et al: government growth precedes trade growth.<sup>29</sup>

There is good reason to suspect that a bigger welfare state encourages rich countries to lower the trade barriers, and so remove one of the major causes of global inequality. This gives global egalitarians further motivation to support the welfare state.

### **Migration**

Migration can be expected to benefit the global poor in four ways. Firstly, there is the direct effect of allowing relatively poor individuals access to the opportunities of rich countries. Secondly, there are remittances - money earned by emigrants abroad and sent back to their country of origin. These have been estimated to be worth over \$80 billion to developing countries, more than they received in aid.<sup>30</sup> Thirdly, developing economies benefit from the return of migrants, having developed skills abroad.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the prospect of emigration incentivises the acquisition of education and skills, even among some who will not eventually get to migrate.<sup>32</sup>

Against this, there is concern about 'brain drain' – the idea that migration leaves poor countries worse off because skilled professionals are lost at such a rate that it is impossible to replace them. Some commentators have expressed scepticism about the problem of brain drain. They argue that professionals only leave in large numbers because there is no capacity in the economy to absorb them - they cannot find jobs at home. Or that other factors, like religious persecution, motivate professionals to leave.<sup>33</sup>

Such a sanguine view underplays the genuine disruption caused in many countries by skilled migration. Carrington and Detragiache estimate that "the outflow of highly educated individuals reaches above 30 per cent in a number of countries in the Caribbean, Central America and Africa".<sup>34</sup> Fortunately, such extreme levels of brain drain are relatively rare. Adams finds evidence that brain drain is a major problem in only a handful of Latin American countries: the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica and Mexico.<sup>35</sup> While the negative consequences of brain drain ought not to be underplayed, it is a serious problem for only a minority of poor countries, and so this effect should not be enough to outweigh the massive beneficial effects of migration for the global poor: in terms of the direct advantages conferred on the migrants, remittances and human capital formation.

Assuming then that greater migration is desirable from a global egalitarian standpoint, does the welfare state encourage or undermine the movement of people to rich countries? On the one hand, the welfare state offers a safety net to workers who might see their incomes compromised by foreign competition, and so encourages support for immigration. Another salient factor is that a generous welfare state might be seen as facilitating integration, making immigration more palatable. However, in more generous welfare states it is possible that people will be more worried about immigrants overburdening the system and bringing it down.

Escandell and Ceobanu have tested these hypotheses by studying the relationship between social protection and anti-immigrant sentiment.<sup>36</sup> Their findings suggest merit in both of them, but pro-migration attitudes seem the more powerful. For the unemployed, living in a larger welfare state is associated with greater antipathy towards immigrants. This might reflect the fact that the unemployed are uniquely vulnerable, and are most likely to view immigrants as competitors for their benefits. However, on aggregate countries with bigger welfare states tend to be more welcoming to immigrants. This result holds controlling for region, income and partisanship.

Migration is an important means of global redistribution. There is evidence that stronger welfare states encourage greater support for migration. Therefore, the global egalitarian has another reason to support the welfare state.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to argue that global egalitarians have pragmatic reasons to defend the welfare state, given that public opinion seems to demand a large welfare state as a precondition of international redistribution. It should be emphasised that this is only a tactical position, while support for global redistribution remains uncommon. All it suggests is that global egalitarians ought to pursue two simultaneous strategies: on the one hand, they should promote global redistribution; on the other, they should defend domestic redistribution. The practical difficulties of this fight on two fronts is a subject for another day.

*Aveek Bhattacharya is studying for an M. Phil. in Political Theory at Somerville College, Oxford. He is an Associate Editor of the Oxford Left Review, and also blogs at <http://www.socialproblemsarelikemaths.blogspot.co.uk>.*

<sup>1</sup> Milanovic, 'Global Income Inequality: What it is and Why it Matters' (World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3865), 17; see also Milanovic, 'How Unequal Is Today's World?', in his *The Haves and the Have-Nots* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> White, 'Ethics', in Castles (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 154. See also Arneson, 'Luck Egalitarianism: A Primer', in Knight and Stemplowska (eds.), *Responsibility and Distributive Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 46-7.

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<sup>5</sup> I make no argument here either for the claim that global equality is valuable, or that global egalitarians have no principled basis to support the welfare state. On the former, See Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). On the latter see my MPhil Thesis, which this article is adapted from: Bhattacharya, 'Can Global Egalitarians Defend the Welfare State?' (MPhil

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# EUROPEAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF CRISIS

Matt Myers

A malignant illness has been spreading at the heart of European Social Democracy. Like distressed physicians the European Left search frantically for an antidote to this terminal malaise. They will be searching in vain. The pandemic of the Euro crisis has left Social Democrats and the ‘Radical Centre’ stranded. Their words ring hollow, their rhetoric insincere and empty. As much as the PASOKs, the New Labours, the PSOEAs, and the PvdAs of this world may protest; their dream of a ‘Social Europe’ has morphed into a nightmare. The spectre of mass unemployment, low growth, and a rebellious population, haunt their minds. The crisis has exposed their true selves. The Emperor has no clothes.

The end of European Social Democracy has been predicted before; why should now be different? In the 1920s the perceived betrayal over the whole-sale endorsement of WW1 led to the rise of Communism as its short-lived successor. Similarly 1968 and the challenge of the different liberation struggles, represented a real challenge to Social Democracy’s status as the most progressive force in European politics. This crisis however remains different. Its depth and severity engenders the possibility of it proving terminal. The final nail in the coffin will come not simply from the shockwaves of the economic crisis. The crisis remains only the *coup de grace* for a political belief system whose structural flaws and contradictions have finally caught up with it.

Social democracy over the past 25 years has systematically cut itself off from its material base. The once proud ideology of the Western European worker no longer acknowledges the trade unions as anything other than nuisances; the working class as anything more than a mythical creature from a bygone era; the alienated youth as anything more than feckless ASBO holders; the unemployed and benefit recipients as nothing more than scroungers on the taxes of the successful.

By embracing neoliberalism, the ideology of unbridled capitalism, Social democracy embarked on the most daring of Faustian pacts. Its fate lay at the beck and call of the market; if they delivered, Social Democracy could sustain itself. By acting as the guardian of the capitalist world order, and by idolising its ‘wealth creating powers’, it has condemned itself to share the same systemic crisis afflicting the whole capitalist system.

There have, however, been many pieces written predicting the end of Social Democracy (from across the spectrum of the Left) for a number of years. Their predictions are slowly coming true. The task of the Left is to appreciate the systemic crisis facing the current European model of Social Democracy. Once this is achieved, we can then start to discuss how the Left can create a coherent platform that separates itself irrevocably from the neoliberal consensus.

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The whole history of European Social Democracy is one of theoretical evolution, fierce debates and radical revisions of the theory and practice of Left politics. To understand, therefore, our current model of Social Democracy, it is important to take into account these changes in its cultural and ideological make-up.

At its genesis in the late 19th century, Social Democracy became the foremost political expression and organizational platform of the Western European working classes. Yet over time this movement had to confront certain critical arguments on the nature of the socialist tradition. Fundamental debates raged over the choice between the parliamentary or revolutionary road to socialism; the nature of the state within capitalism; the degrees of loyalty to the nation state; the nature of class struggle. Out of these debates rose the Social Democracy of the 20th century, with its model party in the German SPD. Social Democracy had reconciled itself with the capitalist system on the promise that it could regulate it using the powers of the state. It was this movement and political philosophy which was to play the leading role in the governing of the capitalist state in the 20th century.

Before the advent of the Welfare State, parties like the SPD created voluntary institutions, from trade-unions, mutual societies, co-ops, and even cycling clubs. Social Democratic politics (or more specifically working-class politics) permeated all areas of society, and subsequently became the hegemonic political expression of the European working classes.

Yet on achieving state power, the stress on proletarian self-organization and 'preparation to rule', was replaced by the values and etiquette needed to run a socialist state within capitalism. The democratic corporatist model (influenced by Fordism); in which workers and employers practiced social cohesion for mutual benefit; replaced the dialectical class struggle. With its organic links to the working-class through institutions in civil society (like the Trade-Unions); the Social Democratic tradition was able to win out against the more antagonistic elements in the Communists and Syndicalists. After the Second World War the Keynesian macro-economic model vaunted by Social Democrats then became the hegemonic socio-economic parameter for all Western-European societies. Socialists, it seemed, could achieve social justice, solidarity and higher living standards, without turning to the Soviet model. The messianic predictions of the dawn of proletarian socialism in the 19th century had been replaced by attempts to allow the working class the lifestyle previously reserved for the bourgeoisie.

Yet the end of the Butskillite consensus in the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s created a wholesale re-evaluation of the Social Democratic tradition. How much of this revision was original, and how much of it built on previous developments, remains unclear. What we did see, however, was the transformation of the mass party, previously based (even if only rhetorically) on working-class solidarity and a more indirect form of class-politics. These mass parties were morphed into the catch-all parties, appealing to disparate interest groups and the aspirational, rather than the working masses. Parties became populated by the salaried full-time politicians, the majority of its upper cadre from the urban middle-classes and the Oxbridge educated. Voters were not treated as political participants in the day to day struggle of politics, but as consumers who were assumed to vote for their own individual and aspirational needs.

With no organic base other than an ephemeral and disparate alliance between urban aspirational middle and lower middle class voters, and the still loyal but increasingly disenfranchised working class core-vote, the resulting alienation was to become extremely acute.

Leaderships were changed for younger, charismatic and photogenic alternatives. Trade-unions and working-class organizations within civil society were distanced as sectional interests. Rather than seeking to emphasize working class solidarity and pride, Social Democrats wholeheartedly embraced the morals of the aspirational middle-classes. It was this class - the middle classes, or those aspiring to the middle-class lifestyle - which represented the ideologically hegemonic force in the neoliberal epoch. Social Democrats made it their duty to accommodate this class so as to appear 'modern' and 'progressive', exactly as the Social Democrats had done with the working class in the late 19th century. So profound was this conversion that concepts like class, or, God forbid, 'class struggle', became dirty words for the Social Democrat. The growing European (debt fuelled) economy, and the belief in the 'end of history', allowed parties like New Labour, PASOK, PSOE, and PS to unapologetically embrace policies of its right-wing opponents and repackage them as a Social Democracy in globalized times. Far from being original, the wholesale adoption of neoliberalism with a human face showcased the absolute dearth of new and progressive ideas. Social Democracy in the mid-20th century at least paid lip service to socialist and working class politics, even if in practice they seldom transformed their words into action. Yet neoliberal Social Democracy revoked even on this small courtesy.

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This is ultimately the sorry state with which Social Democrats entered the economic crisis. In 2002, the social democrats were in power in 15 countries of the EU. In April 2012 they rule in only 5. This swift nose-dive in the electoral successes in the past 10 years is startling, but in reality remains only the surface expression of a deeper rot.

It is in the interrelation of two specific factors which has made the malaise of Social Democracy so serious. The first is the fact that Social Democracy and crises are incompatible bedfellows. Social democracy relies on the fruits of capitalist growth to fund social services and public provision. It relies on 'social partnerships' between workers and employers. It longs for market conditions that will allow tax revenues for government reinvestment and the raising of living standards.

Economic crises do not engender such conditions, but their opposite. Little or no growth means the societal goals of the social democratic government cannot be met; while crises creates conflicts between employers and workers over wages, pensions and job losses. If the market ceases to deliver, then Social Democratic governments become obliged to distribute the bitter medicine of austerity. From the policies of wage restraint by Labour in the 1970s to PASOKs current role in privatizations, job losses and wage cuts in Greece; it is clear that Social Democrats rely heavily on the assumption that capitalism's structural flaws either will disappear, or will solve themselves.

Yet the crisis is also characterized by certain original and unique factors partial to the neolib-

eral epoch. The phenomenon of the ‘squeezed middle’ has become the unifying watchword for European Social Democrats. It is these cadres of middle and aspiring middle-classes that form the vital classes for the neoliberal Social Democratic electoral machine. What, however, the ‘radical centre’ refuses to take into account is what will happen when the standard of living of these middling strata are compromised by the economic downturn.

What we are in fact witnessing is that these strata are in many senses becoming more proletarianized. The recession across Europe has left many previously comfortable families struggling to make ends meet. Wage restraint year on year, job losses, cuts in pensions, and restrictions on benefits and state services, abound across Europe. Working people are now not only paying for their own household debt; they continue to pay collectively for the socialized debt of the banking crisis. Not only has this situation destroyed the belief of many Europeans in the possibility of a comfortable middle-class future, but it is beginning to separate the peoples of Europe in to two great camps. On the one hand, those classes able to weather the storm wrought by austerity, and on the other, those whose previous standard of living and way of life are compromised irreversibly. Once they are squeezed by austerity, the aspiring middling strata only remain a societal force as long as they recognize their position as a middling class; rather than their austerity-endowed position as a form of ‘precariat’ or a new working class. The illusion of prosperity engendered by the debt-fuelled neoliberal epoch has given way to the realities of the present. The rhetoric Social Democratic parties have used for the past 20 years will now become increasingly alienating.

The dead-end in which Social Democratic parties find themselves is due to two factors. First is that their ideas are ceasing to reflect the material realities of ordinary working-people. The second, and subsequently the most important, is that they can offer no alternative to the austerity consensus. Not only are Social Democrats unable to promise their supporters that their governance would be substantially different than their rivals, they remain chronically unable to accept their past failures. The side-effects of embracing the global market and economic and social integration remain numerous, and varied. Geographical disparities in wealth from region to region and country to country remain a growing problem. National specialization has led to over-reliance on certain industries; especially when that industry is financial services, as in the case of Britain and Ireland. Compounded with this is the alienating effects of global flows of people and capital which continue to have disruptive and debilitating effects all over Europe.

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The problems facing Social Democrats are the same ones mirrored everywhere across Europe. The dominant parliamentary Left remains the hardest hit. PASOK in Greece, PS in Portugal, SAP in Sweden, PD in Italy, DNA in Denmark, are all facing similar fates. Alienation from the hegemonic parties of government, Left and Right, has not, however, reached critical levels. The successful election of Francois Hollande in France, Labour’s impressive results at local elections in Britain, and the recent successes of the SDP in Germany show that Social Democratic parties can still retain substantial degrees of loyalty. Yet this process cannot carry on indefinitely. New political formations will begin to challenge Social Democrats for hegemony over the Left; the deeper the crisis spreads, the more serious the challenge. Electorally, both Jean-Luc Melenchon and the Front de Gauche in the France, the shock election of George Galloway in Bradford West, and the SYRIZA coalition in Greece, should appear as an omen to

Social Democrats of things to come.

In the corridors of the European Parliament, the Party of European Socialists (PES) wrack their minds for the why their dream of a ‘Social Europe’ has disintegrated. Their ideal of a Europe delivering on social justice and workers’ rights has been shattered; the only ones who they must blame are themselves. By embracing the neoliberal paradigm so willingly and so comprehensively, they failed to see the wood for the trees. From the willingness to embrace ‘unfettered markets’ in the Constitutional treaty to their complicity in the election of ultra-neoliberal Jose Manuel Barroso to the European commission; Social Democrats have played lapdog, rather than tamer, of the market. The dreams of Social Democrats in the 1980s of overseeing progressive policies of market-correction carried out on a European, rather than National level, has ended in utter failure. The working people of Europe, and future generations to come, must bear the burden of these failures and complicity.

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What comes next remains the most disconcerting part for Social Democracy. From being the beacon of progressivism it has become a prisoner of the system it reconciled itself with. The unfortunate truth is that events in the real world - outside the parliamentary offices and think-tanks - are beginning to gain momentum. There will be very little Social Democrats can do to stop them.

It is still true that the Left should always represent the future. The paradox for Social Democracy is that to re-invigorate itself, it must break the very ideological chains it has made for itself in the past 30 years. These problems should vex only those on the Left afraid to break free. The people of Europe are taking their struggles from the workplace, to the streets, to occupations, and now to the ballot-box. The time for real change is now.

*Matt Myers studies History at Wadham College, Oxford, and is an Associate Editor of the Oxford Left Review.*

# A BURMESE SPRING

Daniel Hutton Ferris

The April by-elections in Myanmar saw the National League for Democracy (NLD) win 43 of the 44 seats they contested, bringing them into a Burmese parliament for the first time. Their leader and figurehead of the pro-democracy movement, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won a seat in a township just outside Yangon, the country's largest city. Her pro-democracy party even won all four seats in the newly built capital, Naypyidaw, where powerful men from the military establishment form over half the electorate. Despite allegations of electoral malpractice, including the claim that ballot papers had wax dripped over the NLD box to stop it being ticked, both parties – the NLD and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) – have accepted the results.

In 1990 the NLD decisively beat another party backed by the military elite after a full-scale popular uprising sparked by an argument about music in a tea shop two years earlier. That result was simply annulled. The Orwellian State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) argued that it needed time to draft a new constitution. In a typically comical example of shocking governmental incompetence, it ordered every farmer to plant Jatropha (physic bean). The plant's Burmese name 'Jet Suu' can sound similar to 'Suu Kyi' said backwards and it was hoped that planting it across the country would diminish the influence of the Lady. Other, less ridiculous measures were slowly undertaken to appease political unrest. A constitutional convention was formed and in 2008 it issued the new Burmese constitution. Power was formally transferred to a civilian government around a year ago. The recent by-elections are just the latest episode in the remarkable – but still fragile – transformation the country has seen since then.

In the west the images coming from Burma may conjure images of the other major democratisation story of our times: the Arab Spring. Is this a useful comparison?

Most importantly, while the most recent changes happening in Myanmar are not spontaneous popular movements in the way the series of protests and revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East were, they are the outcome of previous spontaneous uprisings. There were no big rallies on the streets of Yangon – no fiery confrontations with the authorities. But Burma saw mass popular political movements in 1988 and 1997; the current reforms are welcome elite-led processes in response to these earlier mass movements. The military establishment know that they have had almost no popular legitimacy since the late fifties, when their coup against the ineffective democratic government was widely supported. This legitimacy vacuum was demonstrated recently by the misnamed 'Saffron Revolution' of 2007 – badly named because the monks who led it wear Maroon, not Saffron – which ended when the government filled fire engines with insecticide and faced down the protesters.

What we are witnessing now demonstrates the partial success of the uprising in 2007. In such a deeply religious country, even many even inside the Junta felt they had crossed a dangerous line by killing monks. This and fear of the masses almost certainly played a key role in hasten-

ing progress towards democracy. After nearly two decades of almost non-existent progress, a bicameral presidential system was instituted within just three years. The NLD didn't participate in the 2010 general election, because election laws prohibited anyone with a criminal record from standing for office and Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest at the time. Many observers and certainly many Burmese have been surprised by the speed and extent of changes since the transfer of power to the new nominally civilian government, especially since Senior General Than Shwe officially resigned from the leadership of the USDP in 2011. Aung San Suu Kyi considers his hand-picked successor, President Thein Sein, to genuinely desire change. It is this crucial trust at the highest levels which has brought about a new willingness on the part of the NLD to cooperate.

The causes of the Arab Spring and the 'Burmese Spring' also have a similar parallel. When Mohammed Bouazizi set fire to himself on January 4th 2011 (coincidentally Myanmar's independence day, when Aung San Suu Kyi's father and Burmese independence hero Aung San is celebrated), crippling food price inflation was a crucial short-term factor behind the firestorm his action precipitated. Likewise the Saffron Revolution was ignited by an eight-person protest over rapidly rising consumer prices, including a surprise removal of fuel subsidies, which had large knock-on effects throughout the economy. In both cases, of course, there were multiple other factors – most obviously long-term and widespread corruption and oppression – but commodity prices played a very significant short-term role. Once again, in the Burmese case it is the events in 2007 which parallel the Arab Spring; contemporary events represent a cautious elite-led response to earlier uprisings.

One obvious contrast between the two movements have been the roles played by the US and other powerful global actors. The oppressive regimes in the Arab world were supported by the US, whereas Myanmar famously was not. This is due to US image-management and strategic interest rather than some fundamental difference between the two cases. Myanmar was made a cause célèbre not after the massacre of 1988 but rather in the mid-nineties, at exactly the time when China's 'most favoured nation' status was decoupled from its human rights record. Human rights discourse had recently become important and the US was casting around for someone else to condemn in an attempt to shore up its fragile self-image. Predictably the recent move towards dialogue by the US (and, obediently, everyone else) coincides with a new recognition of the importance of Myanmar's strategic location between India and China. Huge reserves of oil and gas found recently off Myanmar's southern Andaman coast might have also played a part. (European and US energy companies have in fact operated continuously in Myanmar despite the ban on doing so. Unocal, now a subsidiary of Chevron, paid off villagers who had sued them for allowing those guarding their pipeline to rape, murder and enslave local villagers.)

To be fair to the US, they were supporting democracy in both regions prior to the Arab Spring and events in Myanmar. The US 'freedom agenda' promoted by George Bush Jr. is now widely recognised by individuals such as Condoleezza Rice to have been incompatible with their support for oppressive regimes such as those in the Middle East. They console themselves that they spent millions of pounds funding pro-democracy movements which eventually played a major role in forcing governmental change. The sovereignty of allied governments such as that in Egypt could be attacked openly; funds were channelled through legal NGOs. In Myanmar

the CIA still has to play the key role of smuggling in funds for pro-democracy groups and has had to engage covertly with key players in the pro- and anti-democratic elites: the pervasiveness of what the US has called 'low-intensity warfare' should not be underestimated. And the main difference between the two cases is that what in the Arab world was a spontaneous rising with, after a slight hesitation, support from the US, is in Myanmar a spectacle managed in partnership between the US and the native military-industrial elite. Pro-democratic US rhetoric forced a positive line on the uprisings in the middle-east. In Myanmar, US desire to support democracy and overriding material interest are for once running in tandem.

Aside from the controlled nature of change in Myanmar, perhaps the most important difference between the Arab and Burmese cases will be the potentially greater difficulties associated with democratisation in the latter case. First, purchasing-power adjusted GDP per capita in Myanmar, at something like \$1,300, is around half that in Yemen, less than a quarter of that in Egypt or Libya and a sixth of that in Tunisia. With the notable exception of Yemen (at 154th worldwide), Myanmar ranks lower in terms of human development (149th) than every country caught up in the Arab Spring (from Bahrain at 42nd down to Iraq at 132nd). It is hard to make democracy work in a country so poor.

Furthermore, sixty years of systematic political oppression and enforced isolation from the outside world has left distinctive problems. Only a very small metropolitan class has any idea what a political system (or anything else) in another country might look like, perhaps because they have a friend who has worked in UAE or Singapore. Civil society, crucial for any healthy democracy, was essentially non-existent until very recently, when Cyclone Nargis helped prompt a civil society explosion. It killed at least 138,000 in 2008 and, when the government failed to act (and actually blocked aid from entering the country), the people took the matter into their own hands. Popular grasp on political concepts is extremely limited. This is because of both the lack of information and the danger of speaking openly about politics or social problems: all daily newspapers are published by the government; around one in eight Burmese is estimated to receive money as an informer and it is not safe to discuss social issues in public; the education system consists of rote learning and actively discourages any form of critical thinking; free movement around the country is not permitted; life is hard for those who refuse to join pro-government organisations. This list goes on. Daily life in Myanmar is for the most part untroubled by government interference and can seem much like daily life in the UK in some respects. But this appearance is the result of sixty years of fine-tuning an all-pervasive system of repression which enforces a collective schizophrenia about certain social ills. In rural areas most people know basically nothing about government and want only one thing from them: non-interference.

Clearly, there are strong parallels to this situation in countries affected by the Arab Spring. There is, however, a difference of degree. Myanmar was in the lowest category of all four major freedom indices in 2011, for example, whilst Iran was the only state in North Africa and the Middle East to achieve a similar distinction. Whilst Sudan, Syria, Yemen and Egypt have seen press freedom plummet over the last four or five years, Myanmar has been at rock bottom for decades. (Again, Iran is comparable.) Social media and mobile phones couldn't aid an uprising in Myanmar just yet; less than 1% of the Myanmar population accessed the internet in 2010 and the government would have no problem shutting down all communication. Finally,

the Arab Spring region (Iran and Libya are exceptions) is much more connected to the rest of the world via international trade and tourism. In short, there are strong parallels, but Myanmar – until very recently – has been a step below the appallingly oppressive regimes of North Africa and the Middle East, with the exception of Iran and Libya.

Finally, Myanmar has a particularly combustible set of ethnic tensions threatening to tear it apart. The Middle Eastern Sunni-Shia division is of course hugely important in that region. And tribal and ethnic loyalties are also important and much more diverse in North Africa. But the Arab Spring was more about political freedoms than ethnic conflict. Pro-democracy and ethnic independence movements have not occurred together. Myanmar's pro-democracy movement, on the other hand, faces the unavoidable task of resolving the longest still continuing war in history – between the minorities and the state – if it gains power. Myanmar has around 136 ethnicities in a population of under fifty million, most of whom live in the mountains on its borders with India, China, Thailand, Pakistan and Laos. Most of them had never been part of a modern state until their successful destruction or co-option by the Junta over the last few decades by the centre over the last decade. This bloodthirsty campaign has only strengthened their hatred of subordination to the ethnic majority Bamar people on the plains, and it is possible that ethnic violence will erupt if there is political instability in the future. While many groups would prefer full independence, presumably a very talented set of leaders and a lot of good luck and international support could temper this unrealistic aim without another sixty years of war. It is just one more obstacle in the path towards a functioning democracy in Myanmar.

These three factors – extreme poverty, a legacy of sustained and near-total oppression, and repressed ethnic tensions – make democratisation in Myanmar a much more difficult task than it will be for the new regimes born of the Arab Spring. The first two will also make the ordinary people in Myanmar far more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of global capital when that particular tsunami hits their shore.

Things are changing for the better in Myanmar, but there is a long way to go. The currency was recently partially floated and other smaller economic and political liberalisation measures are announced regularly. It is likely that the very worst cases of grinding poverty, as well as phenomena such as slave labour, will be diminished as NGOs are allowed more extensive access to the country and accountability gradually improves. The long-term focus of the pro-democracy movement is now on the 2015 general elections. Civil society needs to be rapidly developed. A base of party activists needs to be found. There is a constant threat of hard-line factions within the military elite getting cold feet and winning more power from the reformists. A lot depends on whether president Thein Sein can play his cards right within his party.

The slow pace of transition is not necessarily a negative thing; rapid IMF-led economic liberalisation such as that seen in post-Soviet Russia and much of the third world in the nineties would probably severely undermine Burmese economic development. Sudden neo-liberalisation is a recipe for serious social problems and the populace needs time to engage in a sustained process of collective political self-education if change has any hope of working in their interests rather than that of Western shareholders and a tiny domestic elite.

Parallels between the situation in Myanmar and the Arab Spring are illuminating as long as the differences are borne in mind. First, if there was a Burmese Spring – a mass popular move-

ment demanding power from the streets – it was in 2007 and 1988. What we are witnessing now behind the Teak Curtain is a controlled elite-led process in response to these earlier mass movements. The urban masses are watching with interest and are likely to become far more involved if the process slows or starts to be rolled back, for example if the 2015 elections go badly. Secondly, the US plays a very different role in the two cases. In the Maghreb and the Middle East it was forced to withdraw support for tyrants to avoid attaining new heights of hypocrisy. In Myanmar it is reinstating support for the military-backed government in order to serve both the interests of the people and of its hungry corporations, which appear to be aligned. Finally, such parallels potentially obscure the fact that Myanmar has been closer in spirit to North Korea than Egypt; it remains poorer and more politically isolated and underdeveloped than countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco or Bahrain, though Libya and especially Yemen have much more in common with Myanmar. As in those countries, the Burmese road ahead is long, dangerous and uncertain. It will almost inevitably involve extensive further violence and repression in the coming years. In both instances, however, there is at least the possibility of genuine positive change for the masses.

While 2012 is not the year for a Burmese Spring, it has been a milestone in a process which should be greeted with cautious optimism. The masses which haven't been particularly involved since 2007 may show their power if the current elite-led process slows or stops and they are (to a remarkable extent) quietly going about developing the political, charitable and educational organisations Burmese civil society so desperately needs. It remains to be seen whether a genuine popular movement on the back of a NLD landslide in 2015 may finally end the military-industrial stranglehold on the country.

*Daniel Hutton Ferris is studying for an M. Phil. in Political Theory at Somerville College, Oxford. He blogs at <http://politicaltheorybits.wordpress.com/>.*

# MOBILE PRIVATIZATION

Peter Hill

This essay is an attempt, tentatively, to extend a certain kind of social analysis, which I am adapting mainly from Raymond Williams, to present conditions. It comes ultimately from the conviction that if we are to have – as we can and must – positive and controlled social change, we must understand our actual patterns of social living and experience. Capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism – these and other oppressive systems we discuss and argue with a good deal. But we must equally try to understand the ways in which so many of us have been led to ratify and assent to these dominant forms in our ordinary patterns of living and feeling. The crisis we are living through is one of our own lives, livelihoods and ways of living, as well as a crisis of systems and institutions. We can talk about the latter for a long time, without seeming to get at the core of our own experience. And then we can talk about our own lives as if they were separate, without really addressing those large external forces at all. The challenge is to see how the two – our lives and the wider conditions – in fact connect.

### Private living

There are many possible points of entry into such a general question, but I will start with a passage from Raymond Williams. In the 1970s and 80s, he defined a ‘unique modern condition’, which he called ‘mobile privatization’. It was, he said, dominant in the old industrialised (‘Western’, or ‘global northern’) societies. He described it in these terms: ‘at most active social levels people are increasingly living as private small-family units, or, disrupting even that, as private and deliberately self-enclosed individuals, while at the same time there is a quite unprecedented mobility of such restricted privacies.’ We move around in enclosed shells, like cars in traffic. ‘Looked at from right outside, the traffic flows and their regulation are clearly a social order of a determined kind, yet what is experienced inside them – in the conditioned atmosphere and internal music of this windowed shell – is movement, choice of direction, the pursuit of self-determined private purposes. All the other shells are moving, in comparable ways but for their own different private ends. They are not so much other people, in any full sense, but other units which signal and are signalled to, so that private mobilities can proceed safely and relatively unhindered. And if all this is seen from outside as in deep ways determined, or in some sweeping glance as dehumanised, that is not at all how it feels inside the shell, with people you want to be with, going where you want to go.’ (*Towards 2000*, pp. 188-189).

I think this is still, recognisably, a central mode of our own social experience, something my generation has inherited and to a great extent grown up in. Its basic assumptions seem, to most of us, self-evident. The family, the small group of friends, the individual – that is real life – isn’t it? And within these private shells things can in fact be made, sustained and changed, while the world outside seems impervious to any active human purpose. Here, in this house, this family, something worthwhile and even perhaps lasting can be achieved. Our relationships outside it come to seem unimportant, accidental, temporary. This is very noticeable in our relationships with the places we live and work in, the people we live and work near. We move somewhere to live, but do not *settle* there. Though we may in fact stay for several years, we tend to think

of it as a temporary arrangement, with no need or desire to come to terms with, to know or understand, the place or the people. They are in any case different sets of people: we work with one set of people, live next to another, socialise with another set again. It is significant that we now use that specific word, 'socialise', as if the ordinary practices of social interaction were a specialized pursuit, quite separate from the other processes of living and working – as they increasingly are, in reality. And if things look better somewhere else, many of these relationships will of course be cancelled and forgotten, as we move on. In this way, many of our desires are effectively displaced: where we actually spend much of our time is not where our 'real life' is. They are displaced, also, away from the present into the future: at the weekend, the holiday, when we retire and move away (to the countryside, perhaps), we will be able to really live. It is enormously difficult to form anything like a full social identity, or a full set of relationships in which mutual responsibility is anything more than abstract or nominal.

In this view of the world, society outside our private lives has no positive content but merely a negative function: of controlling the traffic flow, ensuring that the little privatized units do not overtly collide. It may, by means of the safety-nets we call the Welfare State, provide certain basic necessities – a minimum standard of healthcare or education – but these are interpreted and valued not in terms of any common good, but of private and individual benefits. (Even when we do talk of common advantages, at an often abstract 'national' level, this tends to be in terms of 'national competitiveness', setting our nation aggressively against others.) A good example of this in the New Labour years was the discourse around 'choice'. By this was meant, never the collective choice of a community, a common interest democratically defined – but private choice, the choice of an individual or family (some, of course, with many more effective options to choose from than others). The notion that a community *could* even choose in such an effective and democratic way, that there might be such a thing as a common interest, had apparently been lost.

That New Labour rhetoric of 'choice' also indicates a change in the political location of 'mobile privatized' consciousness since the 1980s. Back then, Williams saw 'mobile privatization' as basically the property of the political Right, which had 'identified it (however falsely) with their own economic policies and value system.... The Left has on the whole been talking about something else.' ('Problems of the Coming Period', *New Left Review*, July/August 1983, p. 16). The New Labour innovation, which Williams did not live to see, was to talk about precisely this social interpretation, from the Left or what looked like the Left. One indicator of this was David Cairns's Conservatory Principle: 'nobody should be allowed to lead the Labour Party unless they understood the desire to own a conservatory.' (See Douglas Alexander, *The Purple Book*, p. 24) Here we have, clearly, the mobile privatized consciousness – the emphasis on the home, presumably occupied by the nuclear family; the belief that improvement is possible, in those private terms. What is different (compared to the right-wing version) is that the State now intervenes directly to get the traffic moving, to ensure the mobility of the privatized units. But the basic formation is the same: State, Society, and everything else exist to guarantee this little world. The whole of politics is now to be conducted in these terms. It is tempting, of course, to see this as natural, the way we all live. Don't we all just want a decent, private life? But in fact it is a definite and deliberate choice: the Conservatory, rather than the Hospital, the Community Centre, the Library.

### Public interruptions

In the 1990s and 2000s, in times of relative economic prosperity, many conservatories were in fact built. This privatized way of living became more widely available and more mobile, in reality as well as in appearance. The increasing absence of any alternative mode, as older settled communities broke up, was compensated for by a determined effort to make this now dominant mode – mobile privatized, aspirational existence – available to larger numbers of people. The losses and dislocations were to a great extent accepted, at least on the surface, and ‘mobile privatization’ actively affirmed. For within its own terms, it offered not only imaginary but many real satisfactions, to more people than in the 1980s. So it is still, as Williams saw it in 1983, ‘ambivalent’. That is, ‘it has given people genuine kinds of freedom of choice and mobility which their ancestors would have given very much for. At the same time the price of that space has never been accounted. The price of that space has been paid in terms of the deterioration of the very conditions which allow it.’ (‘Problems of the Coming Period’, p. 16).

Certain costs were, of course, evident before the financial crisis intervened: unemployment (especially among young people), environmental damage, the widening gap between rich and poor. But it is since 2008 that we have begun more generally to assess ‘the price of that space’. That taken-for-granted public world has forced itself in upon us dramatically. Most immediately, we have registered a real and widespread decline in prosperity: falling incomes, people thrown out of work, foreclosures, debt. The extent to which our prosperity has been based on debt, under the more enticing name of ‘consumer credit’ – borrowing on the strength of future expectations – has been revealed. (See the figures in the recent Smith Institute report, *A nation living on the never-never*.) This pattern of insecurity, which we should remember has been part of the experience of *some* British people for decades, is becoming more common, giving rise to that expression in mainstream political debate, the ‘squeezed middle’. That mainstream interest indicates what the function of politics and government has become: to guarantee the prosperity and mobility of private individuals and families. We saw this preoccupation very clearly in the bank bailouts: private savings, the means of private financial independence, were sacrosanct, and public intervention was needed to save them. But shared public services, according to the same orthodoxy, were inessential and could be cut.

This example itself, though, shows the way in which the crisis, and the response to it, have revealed connections that we used to ignore. This is another way in which public questions have forced themselves in upon our private way of living. We have found how radically *dependent* we are, on a system not merely national but global. The shape of the structures which in fact control and direct the flow of private lives has been to some extent revealed. People outside academic and radical circles have started using words like ‘capitalism’ again: this system, which had too often been taken as simply given, an automatic condition of life, is now named, and to that extent relativized and placed – even if most of the mainstream debate is conducted in terms of ‘saving’ or ‘fixing’ capitalism, rather than moving beyond it.

But while such active steps are being taken to safeguard this still dominant mode of living, there are real and growing doubts about the ultimate sustainability of the private consumerist lifestyle. These are strongest, perhaps, among young people. For we now have a generation – my generation – which is growing up with expectations significantly lower than those of its parents. This is a new and significant challenge. For the privatized mode of existence has al-

ways drawn effective assent from us not only on the basis of *present* satisfactions, but also on the strength of what was promised and assumed for the future. In order to guarantee continued mobility, the external order had to make it at least plausible that there would be stability, or a general advance – with occasional setbacks, perhaps, but certainly not a sustained decline. We are now being forced to confront the likelihood that this way of living will not, even in the short term, be able to provide the freedoms and satisfactions it once did.

### **Immobile privatization**

One kind of response is obvious enough: the continuation of ‘privatization’ despite the decline of ‘mobility’; the resentment of dependence. We will continue to aspire towards the apparent independence which private mobility offers, but this will be increasingly difficult as the world outside our shells continues to intrude. We will not be able to help seeing the various connections that the crisis continues to reveal, between our private shell and others – the other little shells, public institutions, whole other societies. They will be forced in upon us, in the form of exposure and insecurity; and we will resent it. Continued competition for what prosperity remains; resentment of those who have more (and inequality continues to grow); nostalgia, perhaps, for a more affluent past. In the young resentment, specifically, at financial dependence on their parents; more generally, of the selfishness of the older generations who so conspicuously spent away their future. In the older generations, resentment of their dependence on the young for support in old age. In other ways, resentment angrily misdirected, along paths long prepared for it: at other countries, immigrants, the unemployed.

We know the habits well enough: the fear of Other People, the masses, the hordes, who are outside our little world and threatening it. This exchange, from the film *Men in Black*, is as good an example as any:

‘- People are smart. They can handle it.  
‘- A person is smart. People are dumb, panicky, dangerous animals and you know it.’

And you know it: the assumption has gone very deep into our culture, to the point where only the individual is regarded as sane, and any form of collective action looks either pointless or actively menacing. Powerful pressures – in the media, political discourse and our own habits of life and thought – are tending to bring us to perpetuate that way of thinking; in effect, to bury our heads in the sand. It is against such pressures that we must find, if we can, a new way through.

### **Social thinking**

This depends, however, on changing our ways of seeing and of living, away from that privatized mode. What we can take this crisis as revealing is in fact a complex, deeply unequal, but nonetheless vital system of interdependence. Not ‘public’ life, a series of shocks and abstractions, impinging upon our private worlds. But a system of relationships that begin within those worlds, with ourselves individually and those important primary relationships to family and close friends, but extend far beyond these into other lives, other ways of living, other lands. ‘Out there’, when we actually look, are not only great abstractions, Mass Society and the Public, the Economy and the State, Other Countries – but people, living in relationships, and connected with ourselves in enormously varied and complex ways. As Sue Gerhardt has said

(in *The Selfish Society*) of family and generational relationships, it is possible, and necessary, to see our bonds with others not primarily in terms of dependence – with all the frustrations and resentments that entails – but as interdependence, relationships of mutual support. The emphasis can be extended beyond the family context to far wider relationships with people and places. If rising food and fuel prices are making us realise our dependence on the natural environment, this need not be simply a limitation, but can become the basis for the realisation of a sustainable interdependence. If our mobility is more restricted, this can become the basis for establishing more lasting connections with a particular place and particular people, rather than assuming that the answer is to move away. And if we feel our dependence, through the institutions of the state and the global market, upon people, places and resources apparently much further from us, this need not be seen simply as the ‘impact’ on us of ‘the economy’, ‘the government’ or ‘globalisation’, but as the basis for wider forms of interdependence.

Such forms, quite clearly, cannot be achieved without a substantial and difficult reorganisation of relationships, necessarily involving struggles against those forms and institutions – overbearing states, corporations, mainstream media – which have effectively monopolized and distorted our relations with so many other people. We can see quite clearly now the waste and destruction that the present system creates. What is harder to see is any effective alternative. And so we must try to identify the resources we have for such an effort; what social identities offer potential alternatives to ‘mobile privatization’. For the dominating institutions, and the mode of identity that supports them, are not our only inheritance. There are also the still active traditions of the labour movement, and of other kinds of professional association and union; there are the ecological, feminist and anti-imperialist movements, in their many forms. There are the subjugated national identities, in Scotland and Wales, and equally subjugated English regional identities; there are many civic and local groups and movements. There are the surviving shared public institutions, like libraries, universities and hospitals, and the campaigns to defend them. There are settled working communities with strong bonds of mutual support – not just the ‘old’ working-class communities, but also those that include ‘new’ peoples (‘ethnic minorities’, as we still call them).

None of these, in itself, offers a full solution – each one alone can offer only a local challenge, with the probability that it will be absorbed and incorporated into the dominant system. A trade union, if it has no links to a society beyond ‘work’, can become merely a body for bargaining over wages; a local identity or an ecological movement, without strong links to actual working communities, can degenerate into a sentimental nostalgia. The most promising developments come when they are combined, in a move towards a fuller sense of society. This has happened recently, for instance, in the Climate Jobs campaign, with trade unions and the ecological movement coming together; or in the Respect Party campaign in Bradford, with local community bonds and an anti-imperialist consciousness coming together. I have not the space here for a full assessment of these resources, or for the analysis of new combinations and forms. But as the availability and sustainability of the ‘mobile privatized’ mode of living is so obviously called into question, it is worth remembering that we do have – have always had – at least partial alternatives, forms in which a wider sense of social identity and purpose can be affirmed. This is also our inheritance, to discover and renew.

*Peter Hill studies Arabic literature at St John’s College, Oxford, and is an Editor-in-Chief of the Oxford Left Review.*

# ON THE IMPORTANCE OF NOT HATIN' THE PLAYA: WHAT EXACTLY IS SO EVIL ABOUT "KONY 2012"

David Leon

On March 6, 2012 – the day after its release on Youtube – I wrote an article on the subject of Invisible Children and their “Kony 2012” video in *Ceasefire Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> It exhibited not inconsiderable vehemence, and received not inconsiderable attention, along with a healthy helping of its very own criticism. Without falling too far into caricature, all of these counter-critiques basically came down to this:

“While all of your points may be valid, they do not entail that the “Stop Kony” campaign is actually evil, as you say it is. Sure, it might not be the most efficient or the most innocent project, but that doesn’t merit such harsh criticism – just because it might not be very helpful does not mean it is actually harmful. At the end of the day, what’s so bad about a campaign which tries to raise awareness about Joseph Kony’s atrocities and campaigning to send 100 American military advisors to aid the Ugandan government in eliminating him?”

The specific and pragmatic weaknesses of their policy prescriptions aside (feel free to consult the original article for these), why is it that any self-identifying leftist should view that sort of campaign with extreme scepticism and seek to undermine it when offered the opportunity to do so?

Simply stated, Invisible Children, and their latest piece of modish propaganda, put forward and perpetuate a picture of the world which is as inherently reactionary as it is widespread. In the world of Kony 2012, bad things are the result of bad individuals choosing to do them. Evil is a private idiosyncrasy, not a structural flaw. The more that campaigns flood us with stories of rogue Bad Guys, the more heavily entrenched this vision of the world becomes, and the more the true causes of evil slip under the smokescreen. And it is for this reason that we, as leftists, must tend to oppose any kind of campaign which bears these features.

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For if there is one basic characteristic of leftist analytics, it is summed up in the dictum “don’t hate the playa, hate the game.” As a rule of thumb, when seeking to explain or criticise something, don’t focus on the individual agent who acted in the particular instance, but rather on the structures of power – social, political, economic, cultural – which permitted them to act. This goes to the very core of any leftist worldview, and hearkens right back to Marx’s “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”<sup>2</sup>

The focus of any leftist campaign should always and exclusively be the structures of resources and power, not the ill character of particular perpetrators. This much should be obvious: the problem is not that men are evil; the problem is patriarchy. The problem is not that the bourgeois are all greedy; the problem is capitalism. The problem is not that the President is corrupt and should be replaced with his rival; the problem is a flaw in the institutions of liberal democracy.

And Kony 2012 is the emblematic example, the ideal-type, of precisely the opposite kind of thinking, whereby a cosmetic change is effected on the surface, and the underlying causes are left untouched. It is this logic which leads us to blame the financial crisis on the individual greed of those evil Wall Street types, the Bernie Madoffs of this world. And so we subpoena the CEOs of major investment banks, humiliate them publicly, perhaps demand their resignation with comfortable retirement packages – at which point, our rage satiated and a sensation of accomplishment filling our hearts, we allow the financial sector to carry on as if nothing has happened.

We find the twin and obverse of Kony 2012 in the upcoming craze to envelop us in the “Obama 2012” campaign. Obama is Messiah to Kony’s Satan. The solution to all our problems is in the elevation of one man to the heights of power. Political activism means trying to convince others to vote for him, for the election of this one man is the means through which change will come.

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But let us be clear here. I do not bear Bernie Madoff a very great deal of lingering affection. My disgust with Joseph Kony and his band of beasts is absolute, and I want Mitt Romney elected just as much as I want to undergo an enema with a barge pole. But the focus of discourse surrounding these figures – the way they are perceived and presented by such initiatives as the Obama campaign and Kony 2012 – is deeply troubling, and very much to be resisted first and foremost by those of us on the left.

It is not merely a question of opportunity costs – attention devoted to an issue where it could be more fruitfully expended elsewhere. As stated, the problem with these initiatives is that, especially taken en masse, they spread the idea of evil as individual rather than institutional. And this idea is reactionary in and of itself, whatever its particular variation.

For if evil is the work of deranged individuals, the solution is necessarily to deal with these individuals; if good is the work of a couple of virtuous actors, the solution is to elevate and encourage these individuals. And if we are told loudly and often that all aspects of politics are to be understood in this light – from the practice of local democracy to the conflicts elsewhere – then little by little we come to see it as such. The status quo is basically correct and legitimate, and only needs surface adjustment to run optimally. Radical, or even moderate, change is not necessary, because in every case previously, the problem has always been a handful of bad men who were very naughty indeed – why would it be different this time?

In sum: the very logic which inheres in the kind of thinking exemplified by Kony 2012 neces-

sarily predisposes one to a rejection of structural change in favour of a focus on individuals which can be easily understood and marketed. It is utterly anathema to anything put forward by the left, and it is for this reason that it is so very important to fight against it. Whatever the specific effects of "Obama 2008" or "Madoff 2008", they were a loss for the left, because they reinforced the logic of status quo. Every one of these campaigns and discourses weakens our message, erodes our credibility and undermines our very mode of understanding.

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The great argument articulated by the defenders of these campaigns is that they mobilised a generation most had written off as apathetic, and got millions of young people interested in electoral politics and Central African affairs who previously had no inclination towards these matters.

But these campaigns are insidious precisely insofar as this is true: they have inculcated in the minds of a generation of new adults this twisted view of the world. Now, when the kids of the Kony/Obama 2012 generation see a disaster, they are more likely to bay for the blood of a scapegoat, jail the head of government or CEO of the evil company, and leave the state, corporation, and structure of late capitalism quite perfectly intact.

This also goes a way towards explaining the campaign's popularity. A person is easy to blame, by virtue of having a face; a structure of power is much more difficult to feel passionate about. What else can be expected of us? – for we are still glorified apes, after all. And if politics is about electing Obama and eliminating Kony, then all that is demanded from us are token and small, sentimental gestures which are a much easier sell than a call to perpetual struggle.

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The dichotomy between these two paradigms is well articulated in a 1996 interview between Noam Chomsky and the BBC's Andrew Marr.<sup>3</sup> The latter understood Chomsky's theories about power and the media in this individual-moralistic framework, and asked him "How can you know I'm self-censoring?", to which Chomsky replied "I don't think you're self-censoring, I'm sure you believe everything you're saying. But what I'm saying is that if you believed something different, you wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting." Andrew Marr, the consummate centrist, thinks that problems happen through the vices of individuals, and assumes Chomsky to be accusing him of such; he cannot comprehend the structural point being made by Chomsky.

This gap is reiterated during their discussion of the media and the Watergate scandal. Marr argues that Watergate proved definitively that the media was not subject to the power of the government and the business community, because it took off the head of this very state, the most powerful in the world. Chomsky points out, however, that this was the removal of one man, whose sin it was to attack another sector of the American political elite (the Democratic Party), and who was promptly replaced by his Vice-President, with the same constellation of power as existed before. He compares this to the heart-stopping case of COINTELPRO, a set of programs by the FBI to illegally wiretap, imprison, smear through forged documents and

false media reports, and even assassinate figures it deemed subversive. This story was breaking at precisely the same time as the Watergate scandal, and yet was barely reported in the major media outlets, and remains virtually unknown today – unlike the Watergate scandal, which perpetuates the familiar and insidious worldview we discuss in this essay.

There could have been only one response to this situation by a contemporary leftist. She must have worked tirelessly to de-emphasize the Watergate scandal, which is the individual-moralistic focus on an individual which leaves the underlying power structures intact. She must then have reoriented attention towards the COINTELPRO scandal, which actually represented a significant structural truth – one much more important by any imaginable reckoning than the misdemeanours of one Richard M. Nixon.

The case is identical today, and should serve as a heuristic on virtually any issue. The problem of campaign finance is not about one rogue Tory fundraiser who promised donors dinner dates with the PM, but rather the whole issue of money in politics, and the Tory culture of pandering to the wealthy and influential (a culture by no means limited to the Tories). Removing a Hosni Mubarak is nothing if the country remains a military dictatorship, with the very same entrenched economic and political order but a shiny new figurehead.

We should not be obsessed with this mode of reasoning – it remains nothing more than a heuristic, just as all our theories should be used as rough guides, and themselves subject to adjustment and change – but it is nevertheless an absolutely vital one to bear in mind.

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This is not to say that individuals cannot be held to account for their actions, or that they may not be the target of productive campaigns. It is not the case that all individually-targeted campaigns are equal. Indeed, putting an American president or British Prime Minister on trial for war crimes will not do anything about the military-industrial complex, or the basic logic of US hegemony. But a “Tony 2012” campaign to offset “Kony 2012” is a direct attack on dominant, institutionalized forms of power. They are symbolic of greater issues, and serve as figureheads for a much more comprehensive agenda. In targeting them, the manifold foundations of their political power are included perforce.

Indeed, it would be fair to say that, as another heuristic for the left, the desirability of an individual target for a political campaign should be directly proportionate to the power of the entrenched institutions he or she represents. Singling out Joseph Kony and Bernie Madoff – as well as any convenient figure of public outcry; take Tony Hayward, chairman of BP during the 2010 oil spill – has no such wider implications. Removing them, as individuals, only puts a stop to whatever individual crimes they committed, having no effect on the more general problems with which they are associated – conflict and endemic deprivation in Central Africa, financial sector excesses of late capitalism, or ecological regulation of large oil companies.

Rather, the reason we support individual causes and make them the focus of a political campaign – such as demanding justice for a trade union organiser murdered by government security forces, or demanding the release of a political prisoner unjustly held – is that they serve to

attack precisely the forms of power most deeply entrenched in our societies.

It is for these reasons that campaigns such as Occupy are so powerful – because, in their own way, they are strong representations of the leftist worldview, and take as their target structures and institutions, not easily-replaceable figures of scorn. The paradigm case here is again Egypt; Hosni Mubarak was attacked as a figurehead for the economic and political power of the military and established interests in the management of the country's resources. Protests and agitation did by no means stop after his removal, but continued against the regime, having been brought together against one individual figure.

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Of course, all this is subject to the iron laws of pragmatics. If indeed all the attention garnered by Kony 2012 could magically rid the world of the Lord's Resistance Army tomorrow, the material benefits would likely outweigh the ideational costs. I'd be willing to set back ideological progress a great deal to save a human life. Even though I am extremely doubtful that this is the case with Invisible Children, in general, we must weigh these individual-moralistic initiatives against the harm they inflict, by their very nature, on our way of identifying a problem as a society. This principle is not more than a heuristic – it must be balanced with other considerations. But it is an indispensable one if we are to make any attempt at a left-wing approach to politics.

*David Leon is studying for an M. Phil. in International Relations at Wolfson College, Oxford.*

<sup>1</sup> <http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/stop-kony-is-malicious-vile-repulsive/>.

<sup>2</sup> Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, 1859.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuIONVg362o>.

# THE LEFT, THE WORLD AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Olivia Luce

While once heralded as a globally universal force bringing together divergent calls for social justice, left-wing politics in the last few years has barely been able to stick together long enough to serve a full parliamentary term (the collapse of Italy's centre-left coalition in 2008 springs to mind, forcing the return of Silvio Berlusconi). So what went wrong?

Of course circumstances have drastically changed since the mid-twentieth century, and that change has altered the reception of socialist ideals, broadly speaking. But one would think that ideas of social equality would be as relevant today in a world where the gap between rich and poor continues to expand, rendering the upper fringes more and more untouchable to the normality of day to day regulations, politics and interests. While breaking down the myriad of complex forces responsible for this development is essentially an academic exercise, questioning the forces which engender global political solidarity is applicable today in relation to current concerns for the environment.

The origins of European socialism lay in the breakdown of traditional legitimising structures of social hierarchy, resulting in an increasing awareness of social injustice. The advent of industrialisation and urbanisation created the modern capitalist economy and an emerging industrial middle class, built on the exploitation of human and material resources, but without the traditional authority of heritage or religion to legitimate their position. Questions regarding societal ethics began to emerge and new secular systems of social responsibility came to light. These principles quickly evolved to address a number of different socio-economic and political grievances, such as the struggle against colonialism. But as these principles were gradually institutionalised and appropriated to justify territorial expansion and authoritarian regimes, the rhetoric of Cold War politics came to completely obscure, even erode those universal principles which once engendered global solidarity amongst the Left. So is there a chance that such unity will re-emerge in the current political climate against the corrosive forces of what of seems to be a deliberately uncontrolled form of capitalism and free-market economics?

There is, of course, no better uniting force than a global crisis. And the most serious global crisis we face today is the onset of global warming. But is there an obvious relationship between left-wing and environmental politics?

When judged on a purely conceptual level, environmental activists share a common purpose with the Left: protecting defenceless victims of global capitalism and largely calling for state-enforced restrictions upon free-market economies. It seeks to curb the power of conglomerates, with a particular focus on aviation, manufacturing and the global industrial consumption of fossil fuels. While traditionally victims of industrial capitalism were politically vulnerable human resources, now the focus is on defending natural resources. While this theory stands

when applied with broad strokes, certain popular proponents such as George Monbiot have made the connection explicitly clear. He repeats throughout his books, articles and orations that we cannot address the problem of climate change without changing our international economic culture, that the world cannot sustain perpetual economic growth in a planet with finite resources. Together with Tim Jackson's *Prosperity Without Growth*, he represents calls for governments to control the impact of global commerce and industry upon the environment and to control the resultant impact of growth economics, along with the civic behavioural patterns it encourages, on the planet. This employs a pre-existing left-wing approach to politics, echoing the underlying principle of controlling the proponents and the nefarious effects of unregulated capitalism. And with previously untouchable conservation areas being opened up to the demands of corporate interests (Alaska and Canada being two notable examples), there is undoubtedly a need for us to convince our governments to reconsider the 'value' of economic growth.

There have been additional calls for responsible capitalism, emanating primarily from self-interest, fuelled by the personal losses experienced as a result of the uncontrolled risk-taking vagrancies of certain commercial sectors. But popular disgruntlement towards Britain's bankers will not hold the weight of global action. The green movement could therefore serve as the new avenue for a global effort to regulate economic behaviour and so stands as the most plausible direction for a renewed global solidarity among proponents of left-wing politics. But while contemporaries like Monbiot and Jackson do show the inherent association of left wing and environmental politics, for most green activists this association is not considered inherent or desirable. It has become rather a kind of socialism by default.

Practically speaking, the political inclinations of green political movements are ambiguous at best, especially at the local level. Although the implications of environmental politics are theoretically left-wing, proponents of environmental conservationism are often socially very conservative and at odds with the socially progressive attitudes usually associated with the Left. This ambiguity of political association is somewhat akin to those of European anti-colonial advocates in the mid-twentieth century, where humanist movements fought to preserve indigenous cultures against the homogenising force of colonialism while continuing to support right-wing dictatorships in Spain and France precisely because they stood against the forces of anti-clericalism.

So what are the implications of these discrepancies and political ambiguities? They could be an impediment to global solidarity and global action, particularly by alienating potential supporters with the content of their social policies. For instance, despite being elected in the recent council elections, East Oxford's Green party candidate Elise Benjamin raised eyebrows among those favouring social liberalism with her policies against twenty-four hour drinking and by calling for greater restriction of noise production, thereby targeting the area's community of musicians. This dialectic thus brings to the fore an even greater obstacle to renewed global solidarity among the Left: the need to redefine political boundaries. We need to redefine old associations between societal attitudes, political priorities and the management of international economic relations. The left, centre and right are such outdated polarisations of political opinion that international dissatisfaction with the reality of party politics could be seen as symptomatic of the inadequacy of these political definitions. Or maybe it is simply the case

that the world needs to let go of traditional stereotypes which assume that a stricter regulation of modern capitalism will inevitably lead to the return of Stalinist dictatorships.

Either way, the scene has changed. We are now in a new millennium, and we need to renew the intellectual framework for a more meaningful debate to evolve with the potential to achieve real progress. In this age of globalisation and multinational corporations, real change, whether economic or environmental, will only be effected at an international level. This will need a global effort and that will only be possible with a greater degree of political solidarity across the world. In order to achieve that, we need to let go of the baggage of political associations which continues to stagnate the debate both at a national and international level.

*Olivia Luce is reading for a D. Phil. In History at St Anthony's College, Oxford.*

# “POSH MUSIC”: THE TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASSICAL MUSIC AND SOCIAL CLASS IN 21ST-CENTURY BRITAIN

Owen Hubbard

“Classical” music – the significance of the scare quotes will become clear by the end of this essay – is invariably linked in contemporary popular culture with prestige and privilege. Think of that insurance advert from a few years back, with the sound of a Handel orchestral suite accompanying Michael Winner’s dulcet tones announcing that “You don’t have to be posh to be privileged” – or, to take a current example, the scene in the latest Marvel film *The Avengers*, in which an improbably stony-faced string quartet in black tie serenades elderly society ladies in pearls and mink coats in the foyer of what claims to be a fictionalised version of the Stuttgart Opera. (This last example is also an interesting example of the projection of American cultural tropes on a purportedly European setting; while still by no means perfect, social equality in Germany with respect to “classical” music is a vast improvement on the situation in Britain, and still more that in the USA.)

But why the surprise? After all, this kind of music, it might be argued, has been irrevocably associated with economic, social and intellectual elites for centuries: the music of earlier composers, from Monteverdi to Mozart, only came into being through the patronage of wealthy patriarchs of church and state, while later figures of the 19th and early 20th centuries relied on the emergence of an urban bourgeoisie to take out subscriptions to concert series and opera houses. By this definition, then, “classical” music can be very definitely categorised as an elitist form.

However, the question remains of why this should necessarily be so in our current social and political climate; and, perhaps more controversially, whether the distinction between “classical” and “popular” is still (or has ever been) a valid one, or whether it merely serves to further entrench the cultural apartheid which dictates that only certain sections of society can engage in certain types of cultural activity.

Most discourse surrounding music’s social function in 20th- and 21st-century Western society has been influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the work of the Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor Adorno; at the risk of oversimplification, his most often-quoted thesis on the subject could be paraphrased as the idea that “popular music is the opium of the masses”. While I do not necessarily endorse Adorno’s somewhat pessimistic view of mass culture – a view arguably more relevant to the cultural context of pre- and immediately post-war Germany than to that of today’s globalised, post-industrial society – his underlying concept of the Culture Industry has much bearing on the power dynamics of “classical” and “popular” musics (*sic*) in a contemporary context.

Although Adorno’s original concept of the Culture Industry revolves principally around the

idea of escapist light entertainment produced by the forces of capitalism in order to distract the masses while providing them with some sense of materialist aspirationalism (an almost identical concept to the ‘prolefeed’ imagined by George Orwell in 1984), today’s very different social climate demands a somewhat radical reinterpretation of these ideas.

Firstly, the free-market ideology of choice and individualism, which explicitly informs the privatisation agenda of the neoliberal consensus which has governed Britain since Thatcher, also has a bearing on the products of the commercial music industry: no longer are we confined to listening to either highbrow Beethoven and Brahms or whatever happens to be in the current Top 40, with perhaps small niche markets in jazz and folk, but rather we are presented with a bewildering array of genres and styles, from R&B to goth to ‘popera’.

Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, a trend has emerged for politicians and public figures to display their ‘normality’ and solidarity with the ‘average’ member of the public – some of it a genuine and admirable product of the (modest and temporary) growth of social mobility and accompanying rejection of deference to authority in the second half of the twentieth century, but much of it (such as Gordon Brown’s infamous declaration that the Arctic Monkeys were his favourite band, or David Cameron’s exclusion of any classical music from his appearance on *Desert Island Discs*) a cynical and calculated attempt at populist spin. To back up this assertion further, a revealing quote can be found in Carolyn Beckingham’s 2009 book *Moribund Music: Can Classical Music Be Saved?*, from Tony Blair’s former school music teacher: “[Blair] organised a pop group while at school ... [but] he was also a voluntary member of the school’s chapel choir and showed every sign of enjoying singing a wide range of music from Palestrina to Stravinsky”, despite his later willingness to play up his youthful dalliance with rock music and near-silence on classical music.

The previous two paragraphs may have given the impression of arguing that “classical” music is intrinsically important, or inherently superior to other genres. While this is clearly not the case, and in fact there is a reasonable case to be made (though I do not necessarily agree with it) for the idea that its very existence is ultimately unnecessary, there seems no reason why Schubert, Stravinsky or Stockhausen cannot be treated – once the superfluous trappings of fossilised 19th-century bourgeois society surrounding their performance are stripped away – as cultural production on equal terms with any other. While 20th- and early 21st-century society has done a good and necessary job of removing “classical” music from its artificially exalted pedestal, it has unfortunately done so not by levelling the playing field, but rather by inverting the hierarchy and marginalising what was previously an elite genre to the point where people from schoolchildren to Prime Ministers feel ashamed to publicly admit to an interest in it.

A more productive approach, and one which would genuinely come close to treating all musical genres on equal terms, would be to employ what the British musicologist David Clarke, in his 2007 article “Elvis and Darmstadt: Twentieth-Century Music and the Politics of Cultural Pluralism”, terms “productive adversariality”: treating music and musicians with a critical attitude which recognises that value judgements are not totally irrelevant, but doing so in a way which transcends the hierarchical aspect of rigidly-defined genres. Clarke takes as his starting point the realisation that Elvis Presley and the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music (the hothouse from which compositional figures such as Karlheinz Stockhausen

and Pierre Boulez emerged) both had their heyday as major influences on Western music at almost precisely the same time, but are virtually never considered side-by-side. He proposes, for instance, that an alternative approach to musical criticism could consist of examining “a similar impetus to resistance in the music of Public Enemy and Harrison Birtwistle”: perhaps, in a similar vein, a course designed to introduce schoolchildren to musical history could revolve around “premieres that provoked riots”, looking at examples as diverse as Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* and Jimi Hendrix’s rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner* in order to investigate music’s social influence.

While a true democratisation of musical genres may seem a somewhat far-fetched ideal, several pieces of evidence point to the fact that, however much the culture industry attempts to present art music as inaccessible and irrelevant, palatable only in watered-down form as “relaxation” or “classical chillout”, in the right context it is genuinely accessible to all. *El Sistema*, Venezuela’s much-lauded music education programme in which disadvantaged children are given free tuition on orchestral instruments, sometimes to an astonishingly high level, is a perfect example of this. Closer to home, and less often talked about, is the existence in Britain, particularly in the early to mid-twentieth century, of youth orchestras, music appreciation classes, and working men’s choirs and brass bands, which gave ordinary people access to music of the classical tradition often not just as listeners but as active participants – my father, a former coal mine engineer, talks of members of an older generation of miners coming up to retirement in the 1980s who sang opera in their spare time.

So what, then, would a future musical landscape look like, one in which class barriers are removed and distinctions between genres blurred? One interesting avenue is being explored by Classical Revolution, an originally American organisation starting to develop a presence in the UK (including a branch in Oxford) which presents performances of art music (mainly, due to practical constraints, on a chamber music rather than orchestral scale) in non-traditional contexts such as pubs. Another possibility, as already discussed, is to treat all music as just *music*, breaking down the conventional binary of “classical” and “popular” and focusing on genres’ commonality rather than difference.

Whatever, it seems vital that we fight the urge to dismiss “classical” music as irrelevant and elitist. Although the origins of the genre are undeniably upper-class, in some ways it is arguably more democratic than commercial popular music: by its very nature it is a tradition in which anyone with a modest degree of training can become active participants, rather than passive consumers of Simon Cowell’s current most profitable product. By stripping down the barriers put up not only by a stuffy, anachronistic concert culture but equally by politicians and commercial interests who insist that certain styles of music are irrelevant – and, by implication, “not for the likes of them” – we can perhaps begin to move towards erasing one of the most potent symbols of class privilege, and reclaiming a significant aspect of Western culture for the whole of society.

*Owen Hubbard is a second-year undergraduate reading Music at St John’s College; he is also an active performer, and is currently beginning research for a dissertation under the supervision of Professor Eric Clarke on the subject of presentations and perceptions of sentimentality in 20th-century musical performance.*

The Oxford Left Review is a journal of left-wing opinion based within the University of Oxford. Its goal is to encourage left-wing thinking in Oxford and to enable the Oxford left to contribute ideas to the left nationally. Its content spans the plural left. It invites contributions from students, academics and freelance writers, both inside and outside the University of Oxford. The OLR appears termly, in late November, March and May of each year.

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[oxfordleftreview@gmail.com](mailto:oxfordleftreview@gmail.com)