

# A pluralist approach to Marxism

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*The following is a letter I submitted to the Weekly Worker, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB, [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk)) for publication in the 2 September issue*

Like other first-time visitors to Communist University ('Assessments', 26 August), I found it stimulating. Let me outline the main lessons I've drawn from it.

My main criticism is that most contributors to discussions were too abstract, failing to put suggestions in the context of particular countries (or places within countries) or time frames. What can work in some situations fails in others; big business is flexible and we need to be too.

In the discussion on fighting fascism and the English Defence League (EDL), Mike Macnair suggested that Salma Yaqoob's proposal of defending Muslims in their own areas when threatened by the EDL was preferable to confronting them. I suggested to him the following morning that Salma's proposal was good in areas where the left is strong (particularly Birmingham where she is a Respect councillor) but that Unite Against Fascism, led by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), was correct in taking on the EDL in Bolton where the left isn't. He said "Possibly" and took on board my point by saying in his summing up of the subsequent discussion that the most appropriate tactics in London may be different from those in Exeter.

Mike initiated the discussion on permanent revolution and it was clear how different the CPGB's concept of this theory of Leon Trotsky is from that of the Socialist Party (SP), of which I was a member from 1990-98, and CWI linking it to similar organisations around the world. This is one of the problems of trying to unify different Marxist organisations. Nevertheless, the points made helped me come up with a contribution which I believe was very important and worth outlining below.

Trotsky argued that in semi-feudal countries (using Russia as an example in hindsight) the bourgeois revolution (transformation to a capitalist democracy) would need to be led by workers with capitalists playing a secondary role who would hopefully go on to carry out a socialist revolution. I considered similar situations in the Middle East but in the end chose analogies in South Africa and Rhodesia/Zimbabwe (arguing that black capitalists in those countries played a similar role to capitalists in semi-feudal countries although I'm not sure how strong they were until the end of white rule).

The CWI South African affiliate, the Marxist Workers' Tendency (MWT) of the African National Congress who produced the newspaper *Congress Militant*, argued (based on the theory of permanent revolution) that apartheid could not end under capitalism. I argued that due to capitalists adopting a new strategy (releasing Nelson Mandela), the MWT were proved wrong and collapsed. [I could have mentioned a further mistake which caused controversy within the CWI of them supporting conscription, a policy opposed by the international leadership I think, which I have long suspected was influenced by state infiltration (after drawing conclusions about the use of this strategy to sabotage from within in 1998).] I have just checked Wikipedia and discovered that the CWI relaunched it as the Democratic Socialist Movement in 2002, at a conference attended by 45 people, so they haven't entirely

been wiped out.

In contrast, the SWP's International Socialist Tendency affiliate in Zimbabwe, the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), operated within the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), rejecting the permanent revolution theory in favour of entrism, and even had an MP. This has subsequently proved disastrous with the MDC collaborating with Mugabe (and Wikipedia points out that the ISO split in 2009 due to the entrism strategy).

Thinking about the difference between the CWI and IST approaches in underdeveloped countries, I realised that a similar difference is evident here in Britain, with the SP preferring united fronts (led by workers and with a working class agenda) to the SWP's popular fronts (being prepared to collaborate with and limit demands to those acceptable to those of businesspeople). I have tended to regard the SP's methods as superior to those of the SWP (which is unsurprising as a former member) but let's face facts – the SWP was and still is much bigger so it must be doing something right! After all, there is an argument to be made for uniting on the 80% of things we all agree with but being free to put forward the other 20% in publications like *Socialist Worker* – the 80-20 rule advocated by the SP's Dave Nellist in the Socialist Alliance (not to argue however that Dave urged unity with non-socialists unlike the SWP's approach when in Respect) and carried through with some success in the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP), getting six Members of the Scottish Parliament in 2003 (with the achievement of getting socialist ideas to a mass audience not entirely thrown away in 2007 despite the loss of all the seats after the split resulting from the Tommy Sheridan defamation trial). However, I would have preferred the SSP's publications to better reflect the views of revolutionaries within the party, rather than almost entirely arguing for reforms; I disagreed at the time with 80-20 and the need to put across revolutionary views is now greater than ever, after the credit crunch and with the possibility of international financiers pulling the plug on UK plc – perhaps soon after the George Osborne outlines the results of the comprehensive spending review on 20 October, particularly if the TUC organises a massive demonstration the following Saturday (23 October) showing that the working class will not accept the cuts.

The conclusion I've now drawn from the plethora of Marxist organisations, each convinced that it has most of the answers and can become the nucleus of a mass revolutionary party capable of changing society, is that this has its advantages as well as disadvantages – we can't all get our strategy right all the time but there's a good chance that some of us will when it really matters. I also recognise that many people within a host of different organisations (even capitalist ones) are playing a positive role in the struggle for a better society. As my dad put it, I'm a pluralist.

In an informal lunchtime discussion, I argued that I was correct to support Scottish Militant Labour's advocacy of independence, later adopted by the SSP, seeing an independent Scotland as most likely to become the first Western country to become socialist with its population generally more radical than the UK as a whole, but recognised that this had been rendered out-of-date by the credit crunch. One of your members, however, made a very good reply, saying they should "share the love", a phrase he told me was told to him by an anarchist. I'm not 100% convinced that this approach to independence would have been better, but it's a valid point of view.

A final quirky point – in Mike Macnair's summing up of the permanent revolution discussion, he slipped in the phrase "God in heaven". I'm sympathetic to both these concepts, despite Marxists typically being atheists. Perhaps Mike could clarify in the *Weekly Worker* whether this was deliberate or a slip of the tongue!