



# intervention

revolutionary Marxist journal

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**Our work on Intervention makes sense to us only  
as part of the development of a political tendency  
within an emerging socialist movement . We would  
like to make contact with individuals and groups  
that share our political perspective .**

A.S.C.&J. contingent Labor Day 1922

reprinted from 'The Bitter Fight', J. Harris

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## EDITORIAL

The revolutionary left has never been very strong in Australia. While particular historical circumstances have imposed practical limitations, a continual and profound source of weakness has been the absence of revolutionary theory.

Australia has been a capitalist economic formation from the outset of its colonisation, yet it generated an industrial proletariat relatively late in its development. The first avowedly Marxist party did not emerge until 1920. Its creators had read little Marx (and no Lenin until 1926!), and their communism amounted to little more than an enthusiasm for the victory of the Bolsheviks. This theoretical immaturity was revealed, and at the same time reinforced, by the subsequent subjugation of the Australian left to Stalinist theory and political practice fixed the Communist Party of Australia in a barren orthodoxy which was incompatible with any viable revolutionary theory. The disintegration of this orthodoxy in the 1950's and 1960's led to the fragmentation of the C.P.A. as its members sought in various ways either to dispel the nightmares of its past or to recapture the unequivocal certainties of those bygone days.

The 1960's also saw the rise of a New Left, characterised in its initial stages by the double rejection of both 'advanced industrial society' and official Marxism. The single most important factor in the growth of this New Left was America's and then Australia's increasing involvement in a war of aggression in Vietnam. The

inadequacy of a merely moral objection to this war and the realisation that the American and Australian policies were not isolated and aberrant, propelled many in the direction of the Marxist critique of imperialism and capitalism. Yet the discovery of Marxism was made in diverse and contradictory ways.

One serious obstacle to this discovery was the absence of any viable intellectual tradition in Australia and the absence of a Marxist intelligentsia. The handful of intellectuals who aligned themselves with Marxism had in general failed to link their political standpoint with their theoretical endeavours. The abstract nature of their efforts was never overcome. The few who appreciated the political necessity of a unified theoretical practice had found it impossible to sustain their attempt in the face of hostility from the Communist leadership and harassment by the bourgeoisie. Thus when the New Left turned to Marxism it faced the old left intellectuals across an enormous gap for the theoretical tools available to these intellectuals were found to be inadequate to present reality. But in spite of this breakthrough the New Left has not yet fulfilled its potential. Progress has been impeded by hasty and attenuated assimilation of various overseas theories, notably Trotskyism and Maoism; and there has been a similar process of uncritical absorption of theoretical influences such as the Marcusean stream in the American New Left. Consequently, the New Left in Australia has fragmented into its present condition of increasingly isolated and all too often dogmatic sects.

With this history it is not surprising that the Australian revolutionary left has still not developed a knowledge of the workings of Australian capitalism and its distinctive characteristics. Indeed, most of the Left do not appear to recognise that this is a crucial task. Perhaps characteristically, it took an overseas Marxist to force the problem to our attention. James O'Connor wrote in *Arena* 24:

There appears to be a problem of 'locating' Australia in the hierarchy of the world capitalist system. Australia certainly is not underdeveloped in the sense that India, Brazil, and Nigeria are underdeveloped. It is certainly not developed in the sense that the United States and E.E.C. are developed. In short, the categories bequeathed to us by Paul Baran in his classic study, *The Political Economy of Growth*, do not seem to be much help. There is no room in the current marxist world-view for countries such as Australia, which on the one hand have high per capita incomes and on the other do not have an integrated industrial base. I conclude that we will have to modify the categories, fortunately not without help from others.

While we have reservations about aspects of this statement, we do believe that O'Connor has pointed to an important problem — the exceptional character of Australian capitalism — and the immediate task of this journal is to explore and define these exceptional characteristics. Further, we believe that the Marxist framework is indispensable to the achievement of this task. A successful socialist strategy implies a mastery of the events of today and the anticipation of those of tomorrow. A valid interpretation of events necessitates a correct theory, for without theory revolutionary practice can be little more than

pragmatic adjustment to events. To be dominated by events means to compromise with them – the beginning of the slippery slope to opportunism. The conscious avoidance of compromise through a blind rush into activism only begets the same result for here a lack of theory means a lack of realistic assessment of the resources at one's disposal and that of the adversary. Such consequences of the disregard for theory have dogged the history of the Left in Australia. This editorial committee stands by the proposition that an understanding of social reality, of capitalist society, is a necessary condition for a successful socialist strategy.

Such claims are not novel. They have been emphasized time and again by the great revolutionaries such as Lenin and Gramsci. But as we have indicated, the insights they provided were not taken up and practised in Australia. Hence the question must be posed: why are we able to take these insights and why do we see it important to launch the journal now? The answer to these questions involves a consideration of Marxist political and theoretical history over the past fifty years.

The isolation of the Russian Revolution and the ascendance of Stalin ultimately brought about the transformation of the theories of Lenin and Marx into ideologies, that is, into distorted visions of reality. In Italy the fascist judge's pronouncement on Gramsci – 'We must stop this brain from functioning for twenty years' – abruptly ended his theoretical and political influence. With the Comintern dominated by dogmatism, the Marxist theoretical debate was silenced in the international communist parties and only a few lonely figures like Korsch and the members of the Frankfurt school kept alive the best in socialist thought. Through their philosophical sophistication these representatives of Western Marxism formed a viable opposition to the crudities of Stalinism. But paradoxically, the death of Stalin, which thawed the Bolshevik orthodoxy, also revealed the weakness of its opposition. For at this point, Western Marxism found itself literally in mid-air. Having assumed a revolutionary proletariat as an epistemological basis, the seeming quiescence of the working class during the fifties left such a Marxism stranded in a philosophical vacuum, searching for a 'new revolutionary subject' and asserting a purely negative critique of capitalism. The embattled Marxists who had been faced by the crude Stalinist distinction, 'bourgeois science, proletarian science', had introduced and emphasized the young Marx and presented Marxism as a humanism. Such an interpretation was naturally attractive to a number of communist intellectuals who rejected Stalinism. This diluted form of Marxism, 'lived as a liberation from dogmatism', was taken up by the revisionist wings of Western European Communist parties and itself transformed into orthodoxy. A response to the populism and eclecticism inherent in this newly legitimate but equally inadequate Marxism became inevitable.

The past decade witnessed a resurgence of Marxism. Internationally it has been spanned by the revolutions in Cuba and Vietnam, the magnificent explosion of student militancy and increasing working class revolt, plus the revival of notions of workers' control, soviets and the struggle for the liberation of women. (If we wish to trace this development through bourgeois theory, it could be

characterized as the shift from the optimism of the pluralistic and consensus theories of the 1950's, which pronounced the end of ideology and celebrated the stability of capitalism, to the cynical technocratic and elitist theories elaborated in the 1960's) This wave of revolutionary political activity spawned numerous periodicals and journals concerned with discovering Marxism and thereby re-animating the Marxist theoretical debate. Both as a consequence of this activity and critical for its development, at least in the English speaking world, has been the translation over the last decade of all the crucial Marxist theoretical texts. (To name only two: Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* and Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.) The stage is set for solid theoretical struggle and for the production of correct knowledge, as the plea of ignorance of texts can no longer be sustained. The political developments of the last decade have also established the conditions for re-opening and elaborating Leninism and for revivifying the debate around Marxism as a science, a debate which has been raised quite outside of the sterile Stalinist opposition of 'bourgeois science, proletarian science'. It is here that we would emphasize the importance of Louis Althusser.

Our statement that the stage is set for the development of a closer understanding of capitalist theory makes full recognition of the problems this raises and of the work it demands. A successful socialist theory implies some minimum criteria: the understanding of reality must be objectively true for the theory must provide scientific knowledge of society. Such knowledge is not *pure* or *contemplative* but is always guided by the criterion of political intervention. As such it is a revolutionary *praxis* that attempts to effect the theoretically derived alternatives inherent in society. Furthermore, a successful intervention entails change not only in the structures and institutions of society but also in the social relations, practices and beliefs that sustain them. In short, such intervention implies knowledge of the *totality* of the social situation.

This brief account indicates, if somewhat schematically, why Marxism can be elaborated and defended today more successfully than it could two or even one decade ago. But it still leaves the question of why we see the need to launch *Intervention* now.

The weakness of the Australian Left which we talked of earlier, its fragmentary character and the absence of a Marxist intellectual tradition, by itself calls for a serious Marxist theoretical journal. But of equal importance is the present condition of world capitalism and imperialism. The conditions which sustained the capitalist 'long boom' from 1945 onwards no longer pertain with the same force. Over the past year we have witnessed the impossible, the decline of U.S. hegemony over the imperialist world. At the same time, the dominant position of United States capital is being challenged by capital operating out of Europe and Japan. While debate continues among the left as to the extent and significance of this change, the central point is clear that we have entered a period of escalating inter-imperialist conflict. Imperialism also continues to be battered by the liberation forces in the third world. There have been a series of defeats in China, Cuba, and above all in Vietnam, and imperialism is at present in the

balance in Chile in a way that would have been impossible two decades ago. At least for the moment, as the basic conditions of the long boom decline in the advanced capitalist countries, there is rising unemployment, accompanied by unprecedentedly high inflation, instability, and increased working class struggle.

This sketch of recent developments is necessarily incomplete but nevertheless indicates the choppy waters in which Australian capitalism will travel in the coming decade. What is alarming about these events and their possible developments is not the instability of capitalism but the theoretical drowse and strategic weakness of the Australian Left, now faced with such critical developments. Capitalism has never benignly waited for the Left to catch up on events and it certainly never allows second chances in revolutionary situations. The enormous theoretical and political lag of the Australian Left is not remedied by the simple recognition and proclamation of the current instability of world capitalism. It is remedied only by the elaboration of socialist strategy, which demands a concrete knowledge of the specific nature of Australian capitalism within this global configuration — a knowledge worked out to the order of Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*.

None of the present theoretical journals within the Australian Left seem to recognise the compelling necessity of this task in the present situation. It is for this reason that we have decided to launch *Intervention*, and the contents of this first issue should be seen in this perspective.

Our project of analysing Australian capitalist reality is initiated by two complementary articles. One by Kelvin Rowley analyzes the nineteenth century basis from which the present system has emerged and Phillip Moore focuses on Australian capitalism's current prospects. Both of these studies cut across the tradition of populist and nationalist moralism, and present a perspective on Australian capitalism different to that which has been habitual on the Left. Both point not to the sins of wicked indigenous or overseas capitalists, but to the fragile position of the Australian bourgeoisie. The political implications of this for socialist militants should not need stressing. We intend to develop and extend this analysis in future issues. Specifically, we shall shortly be publishing an article on the re-emergence of Japanese imperialism and its implications for the Australian Left.

Last year there was barely an issue of a Left-wing theoretical journal in Australia that did not carry an article on sociology. This is symptomatic of the critical situation within sociology which is forcing the discipline to redefine its relation to the Marxist tradition. But despite their places of publication, none of the Australian articles examined sociology from a Marxist standpoint. Rather, they reveal the incursion of bourgeois ideology into Marxism. By examining the present crisis in relation to the historical interaction between Marxism and sociology as a component of bourgeois ideology, Grant Evans and John Schmid redefine the problems involved and consequently reach radically different conclusions to the earlier contributions to this debate in Australia.

The contents of this issue have been written almost entirely by members of the editorial group. We have done this in order to indicate the orientation of the magazine. In future issues we hope to restrict ourselves more to the task of editing, but with this issue we have tried to give potential contributors a basis for deciding their attitude to *Intervention*.

Finally, we would like to hear from groups or individuals who share our political perspective. We also welcome letters, contributions and criticisms.