

## Alex Callinicos and the future of the SWP

After the departure from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of John Rees, Lindsey German, and now Chris Bambery, and the death of Chris Harman, the SWP's Central Committee now has only one member with a substantial political history on the left or as a Marxist writer: Alex Callinicos, author of 25 books. Paul Hampton investigates Callinicos' record.

**Callinicos' early writings were heterodox in SWP terms — notably, in his own words, “radically anti-Hegelian”. His first book (1976) was a warm discussion of the ideas of Louis Althusser, a Stalinist philosopher and French Communist Party member, who had been briefly fashionable in sections of the British left (though certainly not the IS/SWP) in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but by then was in wide disfavour.**

His other early academic books, *Is There a Future for Marxism?* (1982), *Marxism and Philosophy* (1983), and *Making History* (1987) were notable for offering a version of Marxist theory which discarded many ideas usually considered (including by IS/SWP writers) to be essential to it.

Callinicos wrote that, “No great damage would be done to *Capital* by the excision of commodity fetishism”, although he believed, “The rational kernel of the theory, the proposition that capitalism functions through the competition of capitals and the circulation of their products, is salvageable”. Callinicos associated commodity fetishism with Marx's distinction between essence and appearance, and believed it an error to make this distinction “the organising figure of Marx's discourse” (1983).

Callinicos went further, rejecting Marx's view that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”. The problem with this “dominant ideology thesis” is that, “treats the subordinate classes as passive receptacles of ideas inculcated in them from above” (1987a).

Instead Callinicos argued that “the ruling ideology has served mainly to unify the dominant class” while the masses have been controlled by “the cruder mechanisms of physical coercion and economic incentives and disincentives” (1983). In other words, “The main role of the dominant ideology has been to secure the cohesion and reproduction of the ruling class, not to integrate the masses within the existing social order” (1987).

On this view, “Socialist consciousness is implicit in workers' daily activity, as they co-operate as the ‘collective worker’ formed in the labour-process by the development of capitalism, and as they unite to defend themselves against exploitation. The task of the revolutionary party is to make this consciousness explicit” (1983).

Callinicos said that Marx had veered into a linear view of class consciousness. But his own version underestimated the grip of bourgeois ideas on the working class, and utterly underestimated the importance of the ideological front of the class struggle — the fight for clarity of ideas, for debate and for a rational culture in the working class movement. It implied that ideologies are merely a thin crust that workers can penetrate easily.

It might fit well with the SWP's chronic underestimation of grip of reformism on the working class, and the pseudo-optimism that SWP members fake every time there is a strike, an election or a war in an effort to talk up the possibilities of change rather than soberly evaluate the actual and contradictory state of consciousness in the working class.

A so-called philosophy debate followed in the SWP, where Callinicos was chastised by other leading SWP members — John Rees, upholding the ideas of the young George Lukacs, and Chris Harman, defending the more “orthodox” position. In the late 90s Callinicos would fall into line with the SWP's general culture and shade out his youthful heterodoxy.

Alongside his academic writings, and the clashes with leading SWPers those brought him, Callinicos soon also started to come forward with polemical interventions on current practical political questions, in a way which the



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IS/SWP's previous prominent academics (Michael Kidron, Nigel Harris) had not done.

And in the field of practical political questions, as we will see, Callinicos was the very opposite of a maverick. He chose to write as a rationaliser, a codifier, a synthesiser, a smoother-out, an “established authority” (with the figure of Cliff standing behind him), not as an innovator.

### THE INVENTION OF TRADITION

**Callinicos' widely-circulated writings have played a big role in trying to elevate Tony Cliff to the status of the principal anti-Stalinist Marxist theorist of the second half of the twentieth century among an audience wider than core SWPers.**

“It was Tony Cliff who developed a more articulated theory of state capitalism rooted in *Capital* and the work of later Marxist economists” (1990). Earlier he had written that, “As an analysis of the Soviet social formation”, state capitalism “has stood the test of time” (1982a). When Stalinism collapsed, Callinicos claimed, “the revolutions of 1989 have vindicated [Cliff's] life work” (1991a).

Cliff originally produced his account of the USSR in 1948. His critique of Trotsky was drawn almost entirely from Max Shachtman, largely without acknowledgement. Callinicos rubbed out the context, in order to make Cliff the sole continuer of classical Marxism stretching back to Trotsky.

Cliff called Stalinist Russia “capitalist” because it was surrounded by a hostile world capitalist economy. But he argued that the laws of capitalism did not apply to the USSR internally. Cliff presented the USSR as the highest stage of capitalism, the most advanced example of a universal tendency within the system towards the “statisation of capital”. The USSR was already a partial negation of capitalism, virtually in transition to socialism.

Cliff was actually describing a new class formation, a version of “bureaucratic collectivism”, but labelling it “state capitalist” and (unlike many other people who thought the USSR “bureaucratic collectivist” or “state capitalist”) reckoning it to be an especially “advanced” social formation, almost “post-capitalist”.

He took the widely-used name-tag “state capitalism” and stuck it arbitrarily on the USSR. His 1948 “theory” suffered from precisely the same weaknesses as bureaucratic collectivism: ambiguity about Stalinism's place in history;

the lack of internal dynamics or laws of motion; and uncertainty on political conclusions. By the 1960s, it was plain that the USSR was not catching up with the west, and was in fact stagnating. By the 1970s the system was plainly in crisis, and Cliff's version of “state capitalism” as the most advanced form of capitalism was no longer tenable.

Here too the younger Callinicos was heterodox in SWP terms. Cliff himself had offered no comment on the “theoretical” issues of state capitalism since 1948. Callinicos set out to recompose the theory in tidier terms, explicitly tagging Cliff as inspiring but inadequate.

In ‘Wage Labour and State Capitalism’ (1981) Callinicos itemised Cliff's failings (obliquely) in a polemic against Peter Binns (then editor of the SWP's theoretical journal) and Mike Haynes (then and now the SWP's leading academic expert on the USSR). Cliff himself made no recorded comment on the subsequent debate.

Firstly, Callinicos criticised the argument of Binns and Haynes that “wage labour is not necessary to capital” and “wage labour in Marx's sense of the word” did not exist in the Soviet Union (1981). Callinicos had little difficulty in demonstrating that wage-labour was essential to any Marxist theory of capitalism, and that the “orthodox” (i.e. Cliff's) “state capitalist” view defended by Binns and Haynes was therefore mistaken.

But worse, “The logic of [Binns and Haynes'] approach is that the pressure of international competition was itself sufficient to transform Russia into a state capitalist country”. Cliff's simple explanation, that Russia was a form of capitalism because of the (external) military threat from the west, left out the vital internal dynamics of the social formation which alone could sustain a serious account of its class character.

Callinicos recalled that for Marx, capital can only exist as “many capitals” and therefore reflected that, “Here, I think, we are misled by Cliff's general approach in the crucial seventh chapter of *State Capitalism in Russia*, where he discusses the law of value”. In particular, Callinicos believed, “the assumption that Russia is ‘one big factory’ breaks down when we come to discuss the question of wage-labour” (1981).

Callinicos concluded blandly that Cliff had provided the scaffolding for an analysis. “Cliff has provided the framework within which to develop analysis of the fine-structure of state capitalism, but that analysis remains largely

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to be carried out" (1981).

Nowhere did Callinicos prove the existence of capital in the Soviet Union, any more than Cliff did. The SWP called the USSR "state capitalist" only by abstracting from the reality of Stalinism. The SWP's label of "state capitalism" was no guide to action, because it was never a coherent explanation of Stalinism's laws of motion. The *reductio ad absurdum* came when they remonstrated with those who predicted Stalinism's imminent collapse, by denying that it was about to happen, just two years before the implosion (Haynes, 'Understanding the Soviet Crisis', *IS*, 2:34, 1987).

Far from dissenting from the SWP's general tendency to overestimate the "advanced" nature of the Stalinist economy, Callinicos went further than other SWPers in lauding the achievements of Stalinism during the dark days of the 1930s.

He called the Stalin period "the 'heroic' era of state capitalism in the USSR" (1981), and the USSR was the "vanguard of capitalism in the 1930s" (1991a). He acclaimed "the massive development of the productive forces over 35 years" (1992b) and extolled the benefits of Stalinism for the East European economies, who experienced "much higher growth rates in the immediate post-war era, when they had been incorporated into the Stalinist system, than they had achieved in the interwar years" (1995a). Callinicos criticised those who "greatly exaggerate the role played by coercion in the Stalinist economy" and who "overstate the relative inefficiency of the Stalinist economies" (1995a).

The SWP has often been charitably soft on the Communist Parties, instead of defining them as agents of the Soviet Union in the labour movement and as incipient ruling classes. Again, Callinicos especially. He has gone so far as to posit the CPGB in Hackney in the late 1930s, after the Third Period, during the popular front, during the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and in the strikebreaking period during the war, as a model organisation. (1995a). This trend has been picked up by other SWP academics, who foreground the working class roots of CPGB members and downplay their Stalinist politics.

Callinicos has described "the essential role played by the Communist Parties in the development of movements for national liberation in Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Arab world". He has stated that, "any proper balance sheet of Communism in the Third World would have to enter in the credit column the sincere commitment of Communist activists to the goal of national liberation" (1995a). It may be the case that thousands of sincere and dedicated people joined CPs across the globe with the desire to advance freedom. But the essence of these parties after the early 1920s was their role as agents of the Stalinist ruling classes in Russia, or China, or other totalitarian states — precisely the element Callinicos faded out.

## DISORIENTATION IN THE CLASS STRUGGLE

Where Callinicos stood apart decisively from other SWP academics was in putting himself forward as also an authority on practical questions such as trade-union orientation.

By 1982 Tony Cliff's willingness to commit himself on paper about current politics, never great, had dwindled almost to zero. Cliff intervened, and decisively, in the SWP on current political questions; and he wrote at length on other things (multi-volume biographies of Lenin and of Trotsky). But his ideas on current political issues usually appeared in the SWP press only filtered through what "amanuenses"



Callinicos opposed the formation of a workers' party in South Africa and said workers should vote for the ANC

like Callinicos wrote up or by the medium of interviews.

Thus, Cliff's first statement of the "downturn" thesis was in an interview for *Socialist Review* in April 1978, conducted not by one of the SWP's trade-union activists but by Callinicos. Callinicos became the main rationaliser of Cliff's ideas on practical political orientation.

Four years on from 1978, in 'The Rank-and-File Movement Today' (1982) Callinicos nailed down the conclusions from the "downturn" thesis, which was now dominant in the SWP, with the SWP leaders who had argued against it defeated or departed.

Callinicos argued that, "the strategy of building a national rank-and-file movement is no longer appropriate, and the attempt to stick with it in defiance of reality is likely to lead to serious political mistakes." The SWP had to "draw the logical conclusions for our trade-union work of our reappraisal of the balance of class forces in Britain" (1982b). The chief conclusion was to shut down the rank-and-file groups that the SWP had established over the previous decade. Instead, "The present situation demands much more modest tasks — drumming up support for the tough, long-drawn out battles that do take place, seeking to prevent the collapse of shop floor organisation within particular workplaces, making what can only be propaganda for solidarity, and for the defiance of the government's anti-union legislation" (1982b). In such a way the "party" could be built.

Displaying unbelievable sophistry, Callinicos claimed that, "Building a national rank-and-file movement in the trade unions is by no means essential to revolutionary strategy. The Bolsheviks got by happily without one" (1982b). Given that the unions in Tsarist Russia were effectively illegal, the conditions for a rank-and-file movement were absent. For western Europe the Bolsheviks advocated that communists build rank-and-file movements in the unions after 1921, in a period of working class retreat.

Callinicos embraced an "extreme objectivism", claiming that, "It has simply been impossible for rank-and-file groups to flourish in the period since 1974" (1982b). He also argued that the SWP was insufficiently implanted in the working class to build such a movement. It was a pessimistic perspective in which, through the 1980s, the SWP would combine assiduous "party-building" in abstraction from the labour movement with ostentatious defeatism on the labour-movement front. It would wait until the balance of class forces became more favourable, rather than intervene in the working class to help turn the tide, and build up revolutionary forces through such intervention.

The class struggle proved the falsity of these arguments. The SWP wound up its health-worker bulletin just weeks before a major hospital dispute. In the early months of the 1984-85 miners' strike, the SWP argued the miners were fated to defeat in advance. *Socialist Worker* repeatedly reported the strike as almost a lost cause.

Callinicos' role was to co-write a history of the strike, after the event, to gloss over the SWP's failure to support the strike adequately and the partial reorientation it had been forced to make after the first six months of the strike.

He applauded the miners' support committees as "a great movement for solidarity" (1985), but did not mention that the SWP dismissed these committees as "left-wing Oxfam" until October. The book applauded Scargill's "determination, courage and tactical skill" (1985). But if Scargill had been a member of the SWP they would have withdrawn him from the election for NUM president. Overall the book was what Jim Denham called a "lame and mechanistic excuse for the failure of the project", the premature acceptance of defeat arising from a "crazy depressive pessimism" (*New Problems, New Struggles*, 1989).

After 1988, the SWP sensed a "new mood". They declared the end of the downturn and a new era of volatility — such volatility, indeed, that calls for a general strike could thrive. In fact, the strike figures continued to fall as they had done

earlier.

Callinicos was selected, or selected himself, to rationalise the turn. He wrote a pamphlet, *Socialists in the trade unions*, (1995) which reproduced vast chunks of the analysis from 1982, but with different political conclusions.

The new era was defined as a "transitional situation". The downturn in the class struggle was over. Working class organisation, although resilient, had still not recovered. "The problems involved in building a national rank and file movement" remained "questions for the future" (1995b): in fact, the SWP started to re-enter union left caucuses. Callinicos said four things could be done: build strong sectional organisation; solidarity; work with and against officials; and socialist politics (meaning join the SWP).

In fact, five: also call for a general strike!

The pamphlet justified the bizarre call for a general strike, which the SWP made in 1992 during the pit closures dispute, having rejected the same slogan during the miners' strike eight years earlier, when a mass strike really was possible. (1995b).

The call for a general strike in 1992 showed that the SWP was increasingly choosing its slogans and agitation just to catch the wind, on pure "agitational" criteria, without any reference to basic programme or assessment.

Likewise, the dour-realism of the downturn perspective was really about what the SWP leadership thought it could do, not on the real balance of class forces, or the state of the labour movement.

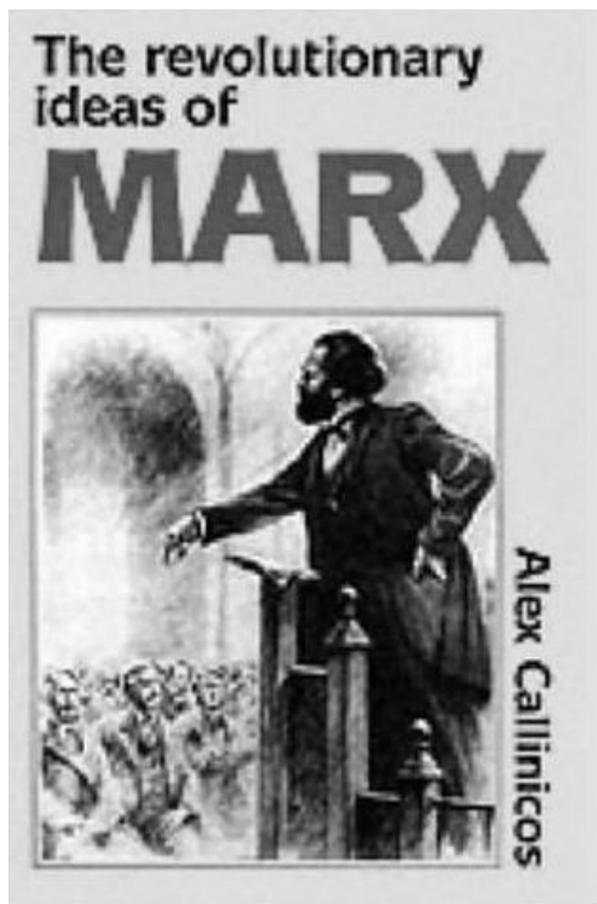
## AGAINST A SOUTH AFRICAN WORKERS' PARTY

Callinicos makes a good deal of his credentials as an expert on South Africa. However his interventions have been appalling. In the early 1980s many South African socialists and trade unionists began to put forward the perspective of building a workers' party. The forerunners of the AWL, around *Socialist Organiser*, took up the issue and propagated it in our publications. In an *IS Journal* article of 1986 and his book, *South Africa between Reform and Revolution* (1988) Callinicos was dismissive of the argument:

"The British Labour left group *Socialist Organiser* argues that 'the best way forward would be a workers' party based on the trade unions. In form it could be similar to the British Labour Party'. One might be tempted to dismiss this as just an extension of specifically British misconceptions to South Africa: *Socialist Organiser* want a South African Labour Party in order to have something to enter...

"Were such a party nonetheless to emerge it would be an important development, and one to which socialists would have to relate very seriously indeed. But it does not follow that, as one of the defenders of a labour party puts it, its formation is 'the vital next step in the development of the workers' movement in South Africa'. The reason quite simply is that a labour party would not overcome the contradictory consciousness of black workers, the amalgam of workerism and populism which even most of the black militants accept. A labour party would reflect all the unevenness of the black proletariat, a class whose consciousness stretches from tribalism to revolutionary socialism... the revolutionary socialist party of the future cannot... start as a mass party based on the unions. It can only begin with the initially tiny minority of socialists who accept the need for the revolutionary overthrow of capital by the black working class" (1988).

Firstly note the misrepresentation of our position. We were described as merely a "Labour left group", rather than Marxists who advocated a workers' party in South Africa not as a cure-all in all circumstances but as a step forward for the class. The emergence of the Workers' Party in Brazil was significant proof of the vitality of such a perspective and an experience that South African socialists sought to draw on.



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Forming a Marxist group in South Africa was (and is) an indispensable task, but it could have been built through a struggle in the trade union movement for political independence, including from the ANC. The “contradictory consciousness” and “unevenness” of the black working class could have been overcome in a struggle for a workers’ party to strike out on its own road.

Callinicos’ perspective missed the dynamic in this discussion. Even a reformist South African Labour Party would have been a huge step forward for working class independence, but there was no reason to expect that the outcome was inevitable. To argue that a workers’ party would be reformist as a foregone conclusion is to omit the fight of socialists to make it something better, a process out which would certainly come a “primitive accumulation of cadres” far better schooled than a bunch of sectarians commenting from the sidelines. Callinicos gave the populists a free reign in current politics, with revolutionary socialism put off to the future.

His was not a rigorous and “honest” sectarianism, but a scheme in which the self-proclaimed purism of the “revolutionary socialist party” was also a licence for it to support any populist activity which might serve what was allegedly the only real revolutionary activity possible, i.e. recruitment to itself.

At the first post-apartheid elections in 1994, there was tremendous pressure to define the contest as simply between the ANC and the ruling National Party. The prestige of Mandela meant that the ANC was certain to win; the majority of black workers would vote overwhelmingly for it. But the ANC was no workers’ party, but a bourgeois-nationalist formation, and revolutionary socialists were excluded from it. The ANC could be expected to do the bidding of the bourgeoisie, including those who had favoured the apartheid laws, once in power (the subsequent history bears this out incontestably).

In these circumstances South African socialists either went along with the wave of populist support for the ANC by voting for it; or took a stand for working class independence and fielded candidates in the elections.

The decision of the Workers’ List to stand Neville Alexander laid down tremendous marker for working class self-emancipation, for post-apartheid struggles in South Africa and for other battles elsewhere internationally. In *Socialist Organiser*, we publicised the activities of the Workers’ List, helped Neville Alexander’s speaking tour in Britain and advocated support for these socialists in their struggles.

The SWP played a miserable role, advocating a vote for the ANC. Their co-thinkers repeated Callinicos’ arguments that the call for a workers’ party was opportunist, a blind alley, a swamp and inevitably reformist (Terry Bell, *Socialist Organiser* 596, 21 April 1994).

Callinicos wrote a lacklustre article for *Socialist Review*, entitled ‘South Africa: power to the people?’ Not once did he even allude to, never mind mention the Workers’ List campaign, which was designed precisely to begin building a working-class leadership. Nowhere did he mention Alexander’s candidacy, despite interviewing him just three years before, and describing him as “probably the best known Marxist intellectual in South Africa outside the Congress Alliance” (1992a).

## THE “ANTI-IMPERIALISM” OF FOOLS

**Callinicos came most decisively to the fore as a leading figure in the SWP on practical political questions when in 1987-8 and afterwards, with John Rees, he rationalised and theorised a major and decisive turn by the SWP towards classless, paleo-leftist “anti-imperialism”.**

His particular contribution here is illustrated most recently by his breathtaking callousness over Libya. “There is the final argument,” Callinicos wrote in *Socialist Worker* (2 April 2011), “that intervention prevented a massacre in Benghazi.” Is this correct? No, he argued: “the sad fact is that massacres are a chronic feature of capitalism”, and “the revolutionary left is, alas, too weak to stop them.”

He was prominent in making the same sort of argument for a “plague on both houses” stance in Croatia’s war to escape Serbian rule, in the early 1990s, and over Kosova in 1999. The job was to strike a militant “anti-imperialist” (i.e. anti-NATO) stance. That meant condoning Milosevic’s murderous siege of Vukovar (1991), and his massacre and driving-out of the Kosovars (1999)? Too bad. “Massacres are a chronic feature of capitalism”, and that’s that.

In the 1960s, and to some degree through even to the early 1980s, the IS/SWP had prided itself on a sort of “third campism” (“neither Washington, nor Moscow, but international socialism”) and opposed “Third World-ism”.

When much of the British left claimed that we must side with Argentina’s military junta in its opportunist grab for the Falkland Islands (1982), because the subsequent war with Britain must axiomatically define Argentina’s role as “anti-imperialist”, the SWP took much the same line on that conflict as AWL: we opposed the British-Argentine war on both sides.

Today the SWP distinguishes itself on the left by its support for the Mahdi army in Iraq, the Iranian regime, Hezbollah and Hamas.

All this is justified by a mechanical transposition of phrases from Lenin, around 1920, to today’s conditions. In 1920, Lenin and the Communist International took a stand of supporting “revolutionary nationalist” movements in the colonies, with their revolutionary quality defined chiefly by



**Callinicos on Qaddafi’s attempts to crush the democracy movement: “The sad fact is that massacres are a chronic feature of capitalism”**

their militancy and willingness to go further than tamer, compromising, bourgeois movements for independence. A world of big powers and colonies, and fluid and open-ended plebeian movements for colonial independence which could plausibly make links with the new workers’ state in Russia, made that stand rational.

A century on, with a more developed world economy and a system of largely independent national capitalist states, the dynamics are different.

The younger Callinicos once dissented from the “unchallengeable dogma” of Lenin’s definition of imperialism (1987b). He used to argue that Lenin’s picture of an imperialist system based on the export of capital to the colonies was wrong when applied to the world after 1945 (1991b). Nevertheless, Callinicos came to believe that Lenin’s political conclusions were more convenient, despite the world moving on from 1920. And if what mattered were the political conclusions, then the assessment of reality was manipulated to fit them. Callinicos’ earlier “heretical” thoughts were blanded down and meshed into a professorial exposition designed to cover all the bases and yet be sure to culminate in the desired conclusion.

The turning point in the SWP’s position was the Iran-Iraq war, between 1980 and 1988. For the first part of it, the SWP, like the AWL, argued for “a plague on both houses”, reckoning that both Iraq and Iran had their own sub-imperialist ambitions for the war, and the working class in the region had no interest in the victory of one side or another.

In 1987 the SWP flipped into support for Iran. Callinicos and John Rees introduced the now-familiar geopolitical scenario thinking to justify the about-turn.

Callinicos argued that the decisive factor was “the US military build-up in the Gulf in 1987-88”. (The USA had covertly backed Iraq from the start, fearing that an Iranian victory would destabilise the whole Middle East. It became more upfront about its stand in 1987 because it looked as if, otherwise, Iran would overrun Iraq). “The US military confrontation with Iran altered the character of the Gulf War”. “For revolutionaries to welcome Iran’s defeat in these circumstances would have been to line up with American imperialism. Revolutionary socialists now had to support the Khomeini regime against the US and its allies, including Iraq... revolutionaries [in Iran] would not support actions which could lead to an immediate collapse of the front and a victory for imperialism (for example strikes which would stop munitions getting to the front)” (1989).

For Callinicos, “Iran’s ultimate defeat in the Gulf was a major victory for Western imperialism”. He criticised those Iranian Marxists who refused to side with either Iran or Iraq”. He later generalised his method to include the Vietnam war, fundamentalism, and Saddam’s war in 1990-91. His conclusion was, “In such confrontations revolutionary socialists hope for the defeat of the imperialist power.” (1991b).

Callinicos’ volte-face made no sense. For one thing, its inverted nationalist method suggests that all that matters is the military outcome of a war, and that the business of revolutionaries was simply to “welcome” or “wish for” the defeat of imperialism. It subverted the Marxist method of assessing the class character of the combatants, and their respective political war aims, with the military consequences secondary. The strengthening of the Iranian regime would have doomed any chances of progress in the region.

His position lacked “any regard for the actual and current class struggles in Iran itself”. A Marxist working class pol-

icy would argue that, “the best way to oppose imperialism is to oppose both the Iranian regime and the imperialist intervention” (“The British left and the war”, *Workers’ Liberty*, 10 1988).

## CLASSICAL MARXISM

**Callinicos likes to present himself as upholding the classical Marxist tradition. But he has used “classical Marxism” as a retrospective rationalising device for the SWP’s current political practice, in which tactics consist of periodic zigzags and strategy is the arithmetical sum of the zigzags.**

The SWP’s “Marxism” is not classical at all; it is a pastiche of whatever ideas appear to yield pragmatically desirable or advantageous conclusions in current politics. It is better characterised as vulgar Marxism, a degenerate amalgam of cauterised Trotskyism, academic Marxism and Stalinism.

Callinicos’ references to “the classical Marxist tradition” have a certain religiosity about them. He fails to face the reality that the “continuity” of the Marxist tradition was decisively broken around 1940, and hence why the first four internationals really are “classical”.

**This explains why the left is in such a mess today and the importance of the ideological front of the class struggle.**

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# The Quinlan Terry of Marxism

By Martin Thomas

**Eleven years after the death in 2000 of its long-time leading figure, Tony Cliff, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Britain's biggest left group, is in trouble. Of the main second-rank leaders who worked with Cliff, only one is left on the Central Committee: Alex Callinicos.**

Veteran SWPer John Molyneux has argued that things may not be as bad for the SWP as they seem. The losses are unavoidable overhead costs from “the struggle against the Rees/German/Bamberg regime which in my opinion was the pre-condition of the party’s recovery from the severe crisis into which we were plunged by the splitting and abandonment of local branch organisation in the late nineties and early noughties”.

Then, convulsive tactical turns (like Respect) disrupted the SWP’s basic routines. For long periods regular branch meetings were abandoned. Regular paper sales folded. Everything was swallowed by the latest tactical turn.

So (an SWP-optimist might say) the necessary recovery could be well served by a Central Committee of organisers with some due modesty about their political pretensions, sheet-anchored by Callinicos, not an organiser but a learned Marxist.

Callinicos’s record suggests that the SWP optimist will be wrong. An SWP in which Callinicos is the decisive figure is likely to remain stuck in a rut of churning again and again through a faded repertoire of tactical ideas, faced up by sophisticated but decadent rationalisation.

Alex Callinicos first came into politics as a student member of the SWP (then called IS) around 1973. He published his first (academic) book in 1976. He remained a student until 1981, then became a lecturer. He is now a professor at Kings College London.

Within the SWP, he was “managing editor” of the SWP’s *International Socialism* magazine in 1977-8, and editor of its monthly *Socialist Review* in 1978-9. He was not on the Central Committee then. Apparently he was reckoned to be a hard-working and talented young member, but rather a maverick, and not a political leader.

He became more prominent in the late 1980s, playing the central part, along with John Rees, in the “anti-imperialist” turn of the SWP in 1987-8. His prodigious output of books and articles also increased.

Paul Hampton has given the history of Callinicos’s interventions on philosophy, on “state capitalism”, and on practical political questions, in another article.

For 30 years now Callinicos has been chief systematiser and theoretical tidy-up man for the SWP. His chief ideological innovation, in the course of that work, has been to “re-brand” SWP politics as the continuation of “classical Marxism”, rather than (as other SWP writers would have it) a series of essays in “fresh thinking”.

The writings of Callinicos, much more than those of any other SWP writer, read as if he sees Cliff and “the IS tradition” as inspired but rather patchy contributions serving to make the link between the “classics” and a neo-“classical” synthesis by Callinicos himself.

Callinicos credits Isaac Deutscher as the originator of the phrase, “classical Marxism”. Another influence on Callinicos must have been Perry Anderson, who used the phrase as a banner in his Trotskyist book of 1976, *Considerations on Western Marxism*.

The term thus underwent a double transmutation: from symbol of tragic resignation (Deutscher), through academic militantism (Anderson), to SWP organising principle (Callinicos).

When we call a body of political economy, music, mechanics, German philosophy, literature, architecture, or whatever, “classical”, the adjective suggests a rounded-out body of work which has permanent value, but also has come to the end of its line.

That is what Deutscher meant when he referred to “classical Marxism”. He expected history eventually to produce a “return of classical Marxism” (*The Prophet Outcast*), presumably something like a revival of classical ideas in, say, architecture: work done by a different sort of people, and with a necessarily different shape, from the original.

Callinicos’s construction of a pastiche of “classical Marxism” outside of time and space suited the SWP well in the 1980s, when, bingeing on the idea that the class struggle was in downturn, it had a narrow “party-building” orientation and (in Callinicos’s own words) “took refuge in the Marxist tradition as protection against the right-wing climate in society”.

Up to the mid-1970s, the IS/SWP had presented itself as heterodox, free-thinking, unpompous. Callinicos’s “re-branding” suited a scheme in which SWP activity was re-focused from transforming the labour movement towards the construction on the one side of a “party” machine, representing an abstract “revolution” and “Marxism” in and of itself, and on the other of “broad fronts” on whatever limited or even foul political basis seemed to catch the wind.

There is a long story to be told about the contradictions of the SWP and its predecessors before 1975, and how they



**The architect Quinlan Terry designs buildings to look classical from the outside, but be modern (structure, materials, floorplans, cabling, ventilation) inside. Above: his 264-7 Tottenham Court Road building. For a revolutionary socialist party, however, Marxism should be not just a “classical” exterior, but the defining structure of politics.**

shaped what happened after 1975. But before 1975 the SWP, then called IS, was a group oriented to rank-and-file organising in the labour movement. It would even claim, though falsely, that “the rank and file orientation” was what made it special as against other revolutionary socialist groups.

In 1975 the IS/SWP split. Probably the majority of its old leading cadres were expelled or quit. At first IS/SWP sought “the raw youth who want to rip the head off capitalism” (as Cliff put it). For two years it floundered and thrashed about. Then it found a successful “formula” - the Anti-Nazi League of late 1977 to mid 1979.

For over thirty years now, successive (and increasingly politically cynical and corrupt) attempts to find a new ANL-type formula have followed, sometimes — as with Respect in 2004-7 — resulting in fiasco.

The “broad fronts” could be lively enterprises making a real contribution to working-class causes — as the 1977-9 Anti-Nazi League, severe criticisms notwithstanding, was — or vile efforts like the Stop The War campaign of 1999 or Respect. The basic scheme remained the same. One of its axioms was that “broad front” activity need not be restrained by socialist principle. It would be progressive as long as it drew people in and served the only really revolutionary activity, viz. recruitment to the (abstractly) Marxist “party”.

## CALLINICOS IN THE SWP

**Callinicos’s decisive political formation was in the post-1975 SWP. He was inducted into SWP culture at the point when its earlier rank-and-file working-class orientation was already being cut away, and something else substituted. He found his distinctive role as the well-read academic who could rephrase that new culture as “classical Marxism”.**

One of Callinicos’s youthful heterodoxies was his sympathy for the non-Marxist philosopher of science Imre Lakatos (a sympathy which personally I share). Lakatos coined a distinction between “degenerating research programmes”, in which theory turns more and more to rationalisation and explaining-away, and “progressive research programmes”, in which new conjectures and new refutations drive knowledge forward.

Ironically, Callinicos’s own theory has become an epitome of “degenerating research programme”. Cliff used simply to change his line, without explanation, and dismiss those who pointed out contradictions as pedants and sectarians more interested in old documents than in new realities. “Tactics contradict principles”, he said, and too bad for the principles. Callinicos has always tried to weave together the “tactics” and the “principles” in intricate syntheses.

As the SWP has plunged through a series of catchpenny campaigns and “united fronts”, Callinicos has had the role of explaining how all the opportunist turns are, when viewed in sufficiently learned terms of theory, good coin of an intact “classical Marxism”.

In *Trotskyism* (1990) Callinicos claimed that Cliff had “continued the classical Marxist tradition” by steering a middle course in the 1940s and 50s between “Orthodoxies” and “Heresies”.

Callinicos equated “orthodoxy” with Jack Barnes, Isaac Deutscher, and Perry Anderson, in a way that did not deal loyally at all with most of the “orthodox” Trotskyists. Even-handedly, and in urbane academic style, Callinicos dismissed Max Shachtman, CLR James, and Cornelius Castoriadis, as “heretics”.

If, as Callinicos surely believes, the Stalinist USSR was by 1939-40 a class-exploitative imperialist state, then Shachtman must have been right against Trotsky and Cannon in 1939-40 to reject any “defence” of the USSR in its in-

vasion of Finland. No, says Callinicos: Trotsky and Cannon were right in 1940 to denounce Shachtman and his friends “as a ‘petty bourgeois opposition’ which had capitulated to pressures from the liberal intelligentsia”. The continuation of “classical Marxism” would come, through Cliff, in abstraction from such political fights as over Finland in 1939-40.

There is a method here rather like that of liberal Christian theology since the time at which the theologians had to concede to Darwin on evolution and to historical scholarship on the Bible being a patchwork of contradictions, corruptions, and accretions. Their trick was to fabricate a stance comfortably midway between the excessive “orthodoxies” of more fundamentalist Christians and the dread “heresies” of atheists, and invulnerable to refutation.

Likewise with Callinicos. The effect is to claim a “classical Marxist” niche, status, or profile for the SWP in abstraction from whatever campaign or activity it is currently running.

Socialists who have university jobs — with all the advantages such jobs give, in access to libraries, relative leisure, etc. — have often made big contributions to the movement. Socialists coming from posh family backgrounds have been so important that the *Communist Manifesto* itself mentioned their role in bringing “fresh elements of enlightenment and progress”.

All that said, in the whole history of the movement it has been very unusual for socialists with backgrounds and career choices like Callinicos’s to make the sort of choice of issues on which first to put themselves forward as political authorities that Callinicos made. He put himself forward as the voice of severe Marxist orthodoxy to tell rank-and-file trade unionists that their organising efforts were futile tinkering, and to tell black workers in southern Africa that their political awareness was so limited that their self-organisation into a workers’ party was worthless compared with the self-promotion of a small group of revolutionary aficionados.

His later interventions have stood out, within the general range of SWP literature, for their efforts to integrate whatever current political point Callinicos is promoting into elaborate, all-bases-covered, would-be magisterial syntheses.

The veteran Trotskyist Bill Hunter chose a good title for his autobiography: *Lifelong Apprenticeship*. For Callinicos, an appropriate biography title would be: “Lifelong Professorship”.

Comparing Callinicos’s record with that of John Rees, who now leads Counterfire, sheds light on the current split between Callinicos’s SWP and Counterfire.

Although Rees is seven years younger than Callinicos, in SWP terms they are near-contemporaries. Both came into politics and into the SWP in the early or mid 70s; both became prominent as young SWP intellectuals in the 1980s. Both are proficient in a hectoring, heresy-hunting, polemical style which must have helped “kill off” any talented young SWPers who might have emerged to jostle them.

In other ways they contrast. Callinicos, from an aristocratic family background, was at Oxford University; Rees, from a labour-movement family background, at Portsmouth Poly. Callinicos first became prominent as a writer with high theoretical pretences; Rees, as a student activist and then as a hands-on SWP organiser. Callinicos went on with a university career. Rees became a long-term SWP full-timer.

In the 1980s Callinicos and Rees worked together as amanuenses of Cliff in the theorisation of the SWP’s “anti-imperialist” turn, from 1987-8, and its dumping of the vestiges of its “third camp” past; but even then, when they were working side by side, Callinicos’s versions had a more “Marxological” character, Rees’s more empirical.

Rees prides himself on being the man who grasps the main thing to be done and goes for it headlong; Callinicos prides himself on being the synthesiser, the man with an overview.

When he split from the SWP, Rees presented himself as the architect and hands-on organiser of an approach which could and would hurl socialists into successive “united front” initiatives and turns with verve and urgency, whereas (he said) his opponents, round Callinicos, represented a prissy, quibbling approach, rationalised in the name of “party-building”.

Rees took the lead in hurling the SWP into Respect, while Callinicos spent that time writing his *Anti-Capitalist Manifesto* and his book on *American Power*. That hardly makes Rees “better” than Callinicos. Better dawdling than that sort of “decisiveness”!

But Rees may be right that Callinicos and he embody different emphases within the general SWP scheme of recent decades.

**Between Counterfire and SWP, Rees and Callinicos, it is as if SWP-minded activists have a choice between Zaha Hadid and Quinlan Terry to design their political edifice, but always on foundations of the approach which sees politics as a game of balancing sham “united fronts” and abstract “party-building”.**