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Britain

Culture Wars and Class Wars

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Recent articles on left-wing websites have deprecated the notion of 'culture wars', saying that the Left should avoid them and concentrate instead on class war. The basic idea being put forward is that we should avoid political and cultural clashes among the working class and potential allies, and concentrate on uniting workers against the bosses. Let's build working class unity against the capitalists - and what right-thinking socialist could disagree with that?

One author says for the Left to engage in culture wars means:

"Whether dealing with matters of race, age, region, sex or sexuality, this is a framing of politics that essentially punches sideways rather than upwards."

As against this "Finding common cause on a class basis is how reactionary ideas within the working class can be challenged..." [\[1\]](#)

Similarly, a curious editorial in the Morning Star, under the title "A Culture War is No Substitute for Class Politics", takes John McDonnell to task for suggesting the Left needs to wage an online culture war against the Right, saying that:

"McDonnell argues for a 'culture war' which we can win with leading edge creativity. But that is no substitute at all for challenging the actual existing mechanisms by which corporate power is exercised." [\[2\]](#)

Which is a spectacular example of false counterposition.

But the essential argument of the 'down with culture wars' Left is that finding common cause on class issues is the way that reactionary ideas can be defeated. This is simplistic and one-sided, and does not address the real situation in Britain or many other countries including the United States.

That reality is that culture wars have been imposed on the working class and the Left - by the Right and the extreme right. This is not a new process, of course, but one that has been heightened recently by the surge of anti-immigrant xenophobia, which ensured the victory of the 'Yes' vote in the 2016 referendum and the final conquest of the Conservative Party by its most right-wing faction. And that while of course trying to unite workers in struggle is a crucial background to defeating reaction, it is not enough.

In the era of Trump, Farage, Salvini and Johnson, the crucial weapons that have been used to divide the working class are anti-immigrant racism and xenophobia, as well as misogyny, homophobia and reactionary hyper-masculinity, some of which have gone deeply into sections of the working class. Fighting against these things is the specific form of the culture war that the Left has to wage. It would be much better if we did not have to, but this is the situation we face.

The ruling class reaches for racism and xenophobia

An anecdote. In 2001 I went to a Globalise Resistance conference in Hammersmith Town Hall. This was the period in which the global justice movement was surging internationally. A speaker from the American organisation Global Exchange said, to huge applause "We're winning this one." Soon after, a giant global justice march, with hundreds of thousands expected, was scheduled for Washington on 15 September. But four days before it happened, the 9/11 attacks took place. In the atmosphere that followed, the organisers were compelled to cancel the march. What followed was a huge war drive and Islamophobic offensive by the Bush regime and the Right internationally.

This rightist offensive had a mixed effect in Europe. The 2002 European Social Forum in Florence was preceded by a giant march around anti-war and anti-neoliberal themes. The march was warmly welcomed by local people, who cheered and hung banners from blocks of flats on the route, something hard to imagine in Italy today. [3] In 2002 and 2003 a formidable international anti-war movement was built, not least the Stop the War Coalition in the UK which mobilised up to two million people in London the eve of the war.

But tragically even this level of opposition could not prevent war in the Middle East, especially given the near-unanimity of the Republican and Democrats in the United States. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq set the scene for a giant Islamophobic campaign by the Right and the extreme Right, which became the cutting edge of racism in many countries, feeding into the anti-immigrant racist wave.

The wars also created hundreds of thousands of refugees, especially as the crisis without end for the people of Iraq, Afghanistan and then the people of Syria led to an inevitable attempt by many thousands to get to European countries.

At the same time massive poverty, combined with right-wing and drug gang violence, drove hundreds of thousands of Central Americans towards the US border. These immigrants were seized upon as a target by the extreme Right to generate mass racism, in Europe and the United States: this anti-immigrant xenophobia created the basis for Trump and the Brexit 'yes' vote. Neither Obama, who deported three million 'illegal' immigrants, nor New Labour figures like Gordon Brown ("British jobs for British workers"), fought the racist tide. Today Islamophobia remains the centre-piece of racism and xenophobia in Britain and throughout Europe - especially in Italy. The Italian extreme right Lega party and its fascist allies in the Brothers of Italy have added anti-Roma racism, something that has gone widely across Europe from France to Hungary, and in the latter case a large dose of anti-Semitism has been added. [4]

White racism in the UK

Ten years ago many people on the Left thought that the battle against racism and for multiculturalism had been won, and that multiculturalism was becoming the dominant outlook of people in the UK. [5] But in 2020 that view must be challenged, especially after the upsurge of xenophobia around the Brexit vote. Recent opinion poll results show some alarming trends, for example that 47% of white people who voted Remain in the 2016 referendum say that wanting to reduce immigration to ensure white dominance is racist. [6] But only 5% of those who voted Leave agree. Overall 66% of voters who generally favour immigration say wanting to preserve white dominance is racist: just three per cent of anti-immigrant voters agree. These figures are reflected in similar opinion polls in the US. What do they tell us?

First, that voting Leave in the EU referendum strongly correlates with being anti-immigration, and that most often corresponds to being in favour of maintaining a white majority. But we knew that anyway. Contrary to what is imagined by 'Lexiteer' tendencies, the 2016 referendum and its mobilisation of anti-immigrant, anti-European xenophobia, set the scene for the eventual takeover of the Conservative Party by the hard right, and then the Tory victory in the 2019 general election. [7]

Second, anti-immigration voters are increasingly comfortable with wanting to defend what they see as the special interests of the white majority, i.e. being more or less openly racist and openly repudiating multiculturalism.

But there is worse to come. White self-interest (aka racism) is increasingly seen in elite right-wing circles as perfectly respectable. For example, a recent report by Eric Kaufmann, Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, published by the pro-Conservative Policy Exchange think tank, insists that 'racial self interest is not racism'. [8] Apply that to white South Africans under apartheid or white Americans in the Deep South during the civil rights battles, and see what you get. A cover-up for racism, pure and simple. Kaufman's own research shows that white self-interest racism strongly correlates to voting Leave in 2016, or voting for Donald Trump in the same year. Why are we not surprised? Eric Kaufman's recent book incidentally is called *Whiteshift*.

Kaufman's report, warmly welcomed by Policy Exchange, parallels extreme right 'identitarian' ideas, as expounded by the small fascist group Generation Identity. The shocking thing is not that lots of Tories and other right-wingers hold effectively white supremacist ideas, but that they can be openly paraded and championed, giving an elite Conservative green light to all those who want an all-white Britain.

Identitarian ideas closely parallel the 'clash of civilisations' theory put forward first by Bernard Lewis and popularised by Samuel Huntington.

Aspects of a right-wing culture war - misogyny, homophobia and militarism

Culture wars take place because in liberal democracies, however circumscribed civil liberties have become, the capitalist class and reactionaries in general want their ideas to be dominant. Indeed for the hard right to come to power and stay in power reaction has to have a mass base. The term 'culture war' is just one way to describe the inevitable ideological clashes which the hard-right offensive internationally generates. As we have described above, racism and xenophobia have been key to the ascent of the hard right and fascists in the United States, Europe and beyond. But the grip of reactionary ideology on the outlook of millions of people involves much more than racism.

Divisions in the working class are constantly reproduced by misogyny and homophobia. The extent and precise configuration of these reactionary outlooks differs across different societies. For example, the rash of 'LBGT-free zones' in Poland is based on a mobilisation of 'traditional' Catholic culture, as is that country's constant war against abortion rights. In the United States, it is much more difficult for mainstream politicians to be openly anti-LBGT rights, although the Christian churches are. But anti-abortion sentiment is rampant on the right, and has led to the passing of anti-abortion legislation in 30 states. Donald Trump attended this year's national 'pro-life' demonstration, probably not because he has strong views on the issue, but because he wants to keep the Christian so-called 'moral majority' onside in an election year.

To be labour movement or socialist activists in the United States it is impossible to merely try to unite workers around immediate issues and 'punch upwards'. A specific fight has to be conducted on the issue of abortion rights, and in colliding with sections of the masses who hold reactionary ideas, will inevitably 'punch sideways'. If this is part of a culture war, then it is one the Left has to wage.

An example from popular culture: *American Sniper*

How popular culture reinforces reaction was demonstrated by the success of Clint Eastwood's 2014 movie *American Sniper*, starring Bradley Cooper. The movie celebrates a US Marine sniper Chris Kyle, a psychopathic killer who was said to have shot 255 people in Iraq. The film merges anti-Arab racism, gun culture, militarism, misogyny and hyper-masculinity in a toxic, hate-filled orgy of American nationalism. Kyle was eventually shot dead by a fellow military vet suffering from post-traumatic stress at a shooting range in the US.

American Sniper had huge success in cinemas in the United States and elsewhere and afterwards on Amazon Prime. It eventually grossed more than half a billion dollars in box office receipts, with one of the most successful opening weekends ever.

The Guardian's Phil Hoad reported on how the movie hit its target audience:

"What's clear from audience analysis is that distributor Warner Brothers hit a target-demographic bullseye - one that has proved largely resistant to Iraq-war material thus far. Red-state America (i.e. states that vote Republican -PH) has been lapping up *American Sniper*, with eight out of the 10 top markets for the film in the south or midwest, like San Antonio, Oklahoma City, Houston and Nashville - an unusual state of affairs for the average studio film. Fifty-seven per cent of the weekend's audience was male, 63% was over 25. Specialist marketing lionising Chris Kyle, 'the most lethal sniper in American military history', drummed up an appetite for the subject matter via outlets like Fox News, military blogs and *Soldier of Fortune* magazine." [9]

Figures which show a majority male, over-25 audience are very revealing. All over the advanced capitalist world extreme right and fascist parties appeal especially to older men - although of course parties with a mass appeal get millions of votes not in that demographic.

Henry Giroux has described the kind of culture in *American Sniper* as a glorification of cruelty - a society filled with violence and racism, mass shootings, contempt for and cruelty to the poor, militarised policing, and never-ebbing violence towards women, the Black population and LGBT+ people. [10]

Fighting this kind of culture involves numerous political and ideological fronts and political campaigns. The irreducible background to overcoming reaction is the struggle of the working class and its allies, often on economic and social questions directly associated with living standards and access to basic services like health and social care. But the Right has to be fought on its chosen terrains, even if it means fighting from a minority or unpopular position.

This is not something new in the socialist movement. In one of the founding texts of Bolshevism, Lenin insisted that 'social democrats' - i.e. revolutionary socialists - had to confront every type of oppression and tyranny in order to develop the political consciousness of the masses. His words have a decidedly modern ring about them:

"Is it true that, in general, the economic struggle 'is the most widely applicable?means' of drawing the masses into the political struggle? It is entirely untrue. Any and every manifestation of police tyranny and autocratic outrage, not only in connection with the economic struggle, is not one whit less 'widely applicable' as a means of 'draining' in the masses. The rural superintendents and the flogging of peasants, the corruption of the officials and the police treatment of the "common people" in the cities, the fight against the famine-stricken and the suppression of the popular striving towards enlightenment and knowledge, the extortion of taxes and the persecution of the religious sects, the humiliating treatment of soldiers and the barrack methods in the treatment of the students and liberal intellectuals do all these and a thousand other similar manifestations of tyranny, though not directly connected with the 'economic' struggle, represent, in general, less 'widely applicable' means and occasions for political agitation and for drawing the masses into the political struggle? The very opposite is true. Of the sum total of cases in which the workers suffer (either on their own account or on account of those closely connected with them) from tyranny,

violence, and the lack of rights, undoubtedly only a small minority represent cases of police tyranny in the trade union struggle as such. Why then should we, beforehand, restrict the scope of political agitation by declaring only one of the means to be 'the most widely applicable', when Social-Democrats must have, in addition, other, generally speaking, no less 'widely applicable' means?" [11]

In other words, we fight all oppression, everywhere. Not just things immediately able to 'unite the class'.

Culture war is not only waged by reactionary mass media - newspapers, TV shows, the Internet and films - but is intertwined with a huge push on the intellectual front. Reaction wants to stamp out progressive, left-wing, feminist and above all socialist-Marxist thought in the colleges and universities. It understands that cadres won for the Left in universities and schools are invaluable resources for the future. It wants those young intellectual cadres for itself. And to this end it has created hundreds of think tanks and magazines devoted to pumping out reactionary theories. They are massively funded by billionaires like the Koch brothers.

In the United States, right wing think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the American Enterprise Institute and many others dispose of multi-million-dollar budgets and employ hundreds of 'faculty' staff - researchers and writers. In Britain this role is played by organisations like the Adam Smith Institute, the Social Market Institute and the Centre for Policy Studies. Think tanks try to reach out not only into the universities, but especially the media and the government itself.

This is a culture war that cannot be evaded by the Left. It is aimed at undermining Marxism, feminism and multiculturalism, catching social democracy and Keynesianism in the cross-fire.

The culture war against social reaction is not something designed to divide the working class, but on the contrary is aimed at creating the preconditions for long-term unity in the working class and the oppressed in general.

11 March 2020

PS:

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[1] David McAllister, *Counterfire* "[Six practical and theoretical suggestions to build a broad, united and fighting left](#)".

[2] *Morning Star* 27 January 2020 "[A culture war is no substitute for class politics](#)".

[3] A report in *New Internationalist* bitterly complained that the Forum was dominated by the Party of Communist Refoundation and the Fourth International, by which they really meant the French LCR.

[4] *The Independent* 28 July 2019 "[Voices: We need to talk about the rising wave of anti-Roma attacks in Europe](#)".

[5] See for example *The Guardian* 22 April 2013 "[Multiculturalism has won the day. Let's move on](#)".

[6] Quoted at *Policy Exchange* 3 March 2017 "[Multiculturalism has won the day. Let's move on](#)".

[7] The worst of these forces was 'The Full Brexit', see its founding statement at [The Full Brexit](#).

[8] *Policy Exchange* 3 March 2017 "['Racial Self-Interest' is not Racism](#)".

[9] *The Guardian* 21 January 2015 "[American Sniper's record-breaking box office: who saw it, where and why](#)".

[10] Henry Giroux, *American Nightmare*, City Lights Books, 2018

[11] V.I. Lenin, marxists.org "[What is to Done?](#)".