

Historical Materialism conference: Debating radical ideas for change

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The state of the radical left in Europe is quite contradictory. If one just looked at the visible state of political organisation in some countries one could get quite depressed.

The European Social Forum process has descended into a bureaucratic quagmire. The impact of recent or forthcoming elections has thrown the radical left in France and Italy into crisis.

Of course, the picture elsewhere – in England, Germany and Portugal, for example – is much better. And at a more subterranean level, the deep process of radicalisation that started in Seattle and Genoa continues apace.

One example was the conference on “New Directions in Marxist Theory” organised jointly by *Historical Materialism*, the *Socialist Register*, and the Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize Committee in London last weekend.

In reality, it is *Historical Materialism*’s conference. Barely ten years old, this journal is run with absolutely no material resources by an editorial board largely made up of research students and young academics.

The conference was a smashing success. Some 600 hundred people registered in advance and up to 400 took part. A total of around 70 sessions, often packed, covered a bewildering range of issues.

Sometimes at least, the discussions were pretty abstruse. But running through the conference was an effort to understand contemporary capitalism.

The opening session was crammed with people passionately arguing over how helpful David Harvey’s concept of accumulation by dispossession is in making sense of neoliberalism.

A later, even busier, session was devoted to China and the Future of the Global Economy, with Harvey speaking alongside the economists Andrew Glyn and Simon Clarke. I participated in a lively debate led off by Mario Tronti, one of the founders of the Italian tradition of “workerist” Marxism.

Academy

An obvious worry with such a successful conference is that it might represent a pull away from politics into the academy. And no doubt some of those taking part are interested in advancing their academic career.

But I think for the present at least it is a relatively minor problem. Thus the Deutscher Memorial Lecture, given by Kevin Murphy, author of a prize-winning study of Russian workers during the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalinism, was dominated by the politics of the revolutionary left.

One reason why the academic pull is relatively weak is that in most countries the universities are

pretty inhospitable to Marxists. Britain, for reasons I don't fully understand, is an exception and there are a few senior academics who are Marxists.

The historian Chris Wickham, whose great book *Framing the Early Middle Ages* was awarded the 2006 Deutscher Prize, is one of them. I must confess to being another.

But in the rest of Europe and in the US, most Marxist scholars are on the margins of academia, struggling in temporary, part-time teaching posts.

The neoliberal transformation of universities means that more and more academics are condemned to this precarious work. This is why it is both possible and necessary to build a new radical left within the University and College Union.

Finally, of course, the very substantial numbers of young people attending the conference, many of them postgraduate students of some kind, have been drawn towards Marxism by the great movements of the past few years against neoliberalism and war.

None of this means relying on the tide going our way in the universities.

Only a minority of the conference participants would have been members of the Socialist Workers Party or Respect or their counterparts in other countries.

Connecting theory to practice means more than just participating in or sympathising with the big movements of the day. As George Lukacs pointed out, theory and practice must be bound together in revolutionary political organisation.

But *Historical Materialism's* conference shows that the environment for making this argument is more hospitable than it has been for many years.

P.S.

* From Socialist Workers website: http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=10343