



Casting a critical light on Lumumba's legacy

PATRICE LUMUMBA: AFRICA'S LOST LEADER

Leo Zeilig

Haus Publishing/2008/£9.99

THIS IS an excellent book by Leo Zeilig who co-ordinated the Independent Media Centre in Zimbabwe during the presidential elections of 2002. It is full of useful information showing why Patrice Lumumba has become such an important figure on the African left. Crucially, it does not join in the myth-making or gloss over Lumumba's faults.

Lumumba, the first and only democratically elected Prime Minister of the newly independent Congo, has assumed an almost mythical status due to his early death, almost certainly at the hands of, or with the connivance of the CIA. Lumumba was deposed as Prime Minister in 1960 and was executed by firing squad at the age of 36.

The murder of an African leader in the early years of decolonisation sent a warning to others who might have been inclined to uproot neo-colonial power in Africa. Unfortunately, his early death has also resulted in hagiography preventing a critical analysis of the man's politics and its limitations.

Lumumba's first public speech as Prime Minister accused the Belgians of having subjected the Congo to "humiliating slavery imposed upon us by force". This was no exaggeration. From the late 1890s, along with ivory and minerals, millions of tonnes of rubber and millions of francs of profit were extracted from the country by forcing the population into slavery.

Workers who didn't meet quotas had their hands amputated. Rebellion was mercilessly crushed: forced labour, famine and systematic violence killed over

10 million people in the 20-year period between 1891 and 1911. By the 1930s diamonds had joined this bloody trade and workers were also beginning to get organised.

In 1941, about the time Lumumba was becoming politically active, miners and factory workers went on strike, winning 30% wage increases. By 1944 an insurrection was organised which marked the beginning of the end for Belgian colonial rule.

In the 1950s Lumumba was a talented journalist but "far from a radical voice". (p49) His earlier writings advocated co-operation between the small minority of educated Congolese – the évolués, of whom he was one – and the colonial rulers. He reasoned with the authorities to advocate a more benevolent form of rule. He was entirely uninterested in communism or Marxism.

Eventually, his appeals to the Belgian rulers rebuffed, Lumumba advocated independence. However, his Congo Nationalist Movement (MNC) offered no solutions to workers' or small farmers' grievances: Lumumba dismissed "class struggle" as a foreign idea.

With the economy still dominated by foreign-owned capitalist enterprises, a socialist solution to the Congo's problems would have been to attempt to unite the workers' movement to implement land reform. Granting the right of different nations and ethnic groups to autonomy – and even secession – would have drawn these forces to the side of the independence struggle. Whilst Zeilig's book does not endorse ideas such as these it is sharply critical of Lumumba's political limitations.

Lumumba's ineptitude led on 11 July 1960 to the Belgium-sponsored independence of Katanga, a region comprising 12% of the population but with 60% of the mineral wealth,

just 12 days into Congo's independent existence. Lumumba fatally asked for UN intervention, giving the green light to US and other troops to enter the country. By August 1960, with Lumumba seeking Soviet support and military hardware, a CIA-backed coup by the military led by Mobutu took place on 5 September. Lumumba was put under house arrest and subsequently murdered.

Zeilig argues that Lumumba was a naive nationalist, genuine in his fight for meaningful independence and decolonisation, but with no coherent political strategy to challenge imperialism.

Yet he was disposed of because he was not a safe pair of hands to administer a post-colonial Congo, because he still opposed US and European hegemony, however incoherently and ineptly. He concludes that US imperialism could not tolerate an independent Congo becoming important as a source of uranium as well as diamonds and other mineral wealth.

Zeilig shows orders for Lumumba's assassination came straight from the White House, though he somewhat controversially concludes that the Belgians beat them to it.

The Mobutu dictatorship that followed in the Congo from 1965 was one of the most corrupt and subservient governments in Africa. This legacy and the civil war that followed his overthrow in 1997 has led to more than 5 million Congolese dying in the last 10 years. It is the direct result of the west and their multinationals destabilising the state, ensuring that the country is prey to private militias that can plunder the country's mineral wealth. Every time you make a mobile phone call, watch a DVD or use a computer it uses probably illegally mined coltan from the Congo.

A useful and clearly written book, this is a valuable resource for any socialist wanting to learn more about the Congo's bloody past and present. Its extensive references list sources for those wanting to dig deeper.

Jason Travis

China and its quest for a place in the sun

CHINA IN AFRICA

Chris Alden

Zed / 2007 / £12.99

CHRIS ALDEN is a lecturer at the LSE and his book, *China in Africa*, provides a brief introduction to China's increasing involvement in Africa. It seeks to assess whether China's involvement will be that of "a partner, economic competitor or hegemon". This discussion arises from China's playing up of its "anti-imperialist" and "communist" past, its historical support for national liberation struggles and position as a "third world" country like Africa.

While Alden does consider the impact of colonialism on African governments, he is well aware that the contemporary Chinese relationship with Africa is at root much more basic. He quotes Philip Snow: "[A] frank quest for profits by both China and its African partners might well, in the end, prove a more solid basis for their future relationship than the continuing attempt to sustain a rhetorical unity." (p135)

And Alden provides plenty of evidence to show that the surge of trade and investment since the turn of the millennium is fuelled by just such a pragmatic relationship, as China seeks to secure supplies of raw materials for its burgeoning industrial base.

Its involvement in Sudan which, alongside Tibet, has been the subject of so much focus in the western media, shows this:

"Since 1996, over US\$15 billion has been invested by China, primarily in the oil industry and related infrastructure projects. As in Angola, a network of refineries, roads, railways, hydroelectric dams, gold mining and telecommunications has blossomed across the country." (p61)

Bilateral trade has increased

from \$890mn in 2000 to \$3.9bn in 2005, while China has consolidated its hold on Sudan's national resources through a 40% stake in the Greater Nile Petroleum Company.

This pattern is repeated with Angola, which is now China's single largest supplier of oil and China's largest trading partner in Africa – it accounted for 21% of its trade with the continent in 2006. In Nigeria, a

Chinese oil company bought a 45% stake in an oil field in 2005 for \$2.5billion. China's trade with the continent as a whole has increased from \$5bn in 1999 to \$50bn in 2006, and is set to double again by 2010.

China in Africa provides an interesting overview of contemporary Chinese involvement in Africa. Its expansion and influence is causing growing concern amongst the big imperialist powers as the struggle for oil and natural resources becomes more crucial in the 21st century. As in the previous period of globalisation at the end of the nineteenth century the struggle to control Africa's politics and resources is hotting up.

Bill Jefferies



A Keynesian looks at the credit crunch

THE CREDIT CRUNCH: HOUSING BUBBLES, GLOBALISATION AND THE WORLDWIDE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Graham Turner

Pluto / 2008 / £14.99

OVER A year has elapsed since the "credit crunch" first hit the headlines. Now as the locus of the economic fallout shifts from the US to Europe, and with the UK particularly vulnerable to recession, Graham Turner, a left-leaning Keynesian economist, has produced a timely summary of the crisis. It is not likely to be the last.

Turner aims to identify the underlying causes of the financial crisis and the seemingly inevitable crisis in the "real" economy. He concentrates on the US and UK, drawing heavily on the experience of Japan the 1990s – the "lost decade" of economic stagnation – using his insider knowledge as a former employee of Japanese banks.

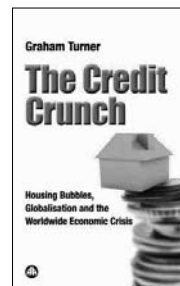
The book is written in an accessible style but is quite technical in places and perhaps assumes too much mainstream and Keynesian economic theory to

classify it as a popularisation.

Turner examines a number of themes – over-investment, asset-price bubbles, debt, income inequality and globalisation – and sets himself an enormous challenge in attempting to integrate them.

Unfortunately, the threads are too often loosely drawn, meaning lost in a maze of economic indicators – interest rates, currency movements, trade imbalances, capital flows, inflation (and deflation) and so on. Nevertheless, he is to be commended for not simply blaming governments and their central bankers (although there have been policy errors aplenty) or the self-evident voracity of financiers for the current economic problems.

For Turner, periods of economic crisis can be characterised as ones of high inflation or deflation. The Great Depression of the 1930s was a deflationary spiral; the 1970/80s was an inflationary one and the 1990s to the present day deflation again. Turner attributes inflation or deflation to a mismatch between global supply and demand. The





Thatcher/Regan era he calls “over-consumption” when demand exceeded supply, the Great Depression and the current period as “over-investment” when supply is outstripping demand.

The result of over-investment, according to Turner, is that workers’ wages will be too low to absorb the

inflated real estate prices in Japan in the late 1980s and the “irrational exuberance” of the dotcom stockmarket bubble. These are examples of the disproportional allocation of capital that is intrinsic to the unplanned nature of capitalism.

Turner covers familiar ground

than it actually has been since 1997. It predicts that real consumption in the US would be 6% lower after 10 years with this constrained rise in debt – knocking about 0.4% off GDP year-on-year – perhaps less dramatic than implied by Turner’s conclusions of a “compelling demand gap”.

The model also forecasts nominal wages in the US to be a whopping 21% lower after 10 years with almost no inflation. This appears to be more persuasive evidence that rising personal debt and the housing bubble have been filling the demand gap and driving economic growth, but it misses out an important fact; workers spending their wages are not the only consumers. You have to include capitalists (and salaried CEOs, fund managers, etc) spending a portion of their profits on goods and services, and on luxury consumption – and this has grown very rapidly in recent years, as illustrated by rising income inequality. The top 1% of households received 22% of total income in 2005, more than double what it was in the 1970s.

Aggregate demand also includes productive consumption, capitalists buying capital goods – buildings, equipment, IT etc. – something very evident in what The Economist called the greatest period of capital investment in history, most notably the exponential investment of China. However, Turner provides little discussion of investment rates.

Yes, living standards for many workers have stagnated for periods, but Turner wants to use this to assert something more fundamental about capitalism today, that low wages and a demand gap have become the cause of crisis.

While it is true that a shortfall in aggregate demand will precipitate and prolong a crisis, this is not because of a deficit in workers’ consumption but because capitalists will hoard their profits when expected returns on investment are too low. Why the rate of profit has a tendency to fall is another story.

It should be noted however, that while personal debt is obviously a major problem for millions of

Turner describes how multinational corporations have shifted manufacturing to the lower-cost emerging economies in the scramble for greater profits

increasing supply of goods and services. His analysis is little more than the familiar idea of “under-consumption”. He is also making a big claim here, that there is a significant degree of symmetry between the world economy in the 1930s and today, something that takes quite a lot of proving, given the crisis-wracked nature of the Great Depression. It is a shame that he did not take a brief look back to before the First World War, as surely the first period of globalisation from the early 1890s to 1914 is more relevant.

A more straightforward example of over-investment that he considers is the east Asian currency crisis of 1997 that occurred after vast inflows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into the growing electronics sector for the export market. This may have led to a glut of goods on the world market in one specific sector but this is not the same as a general glut, and the fall in output probably had more to do with investors ditching the emerging economies of East Asia for the US that was experiencing an IT-led productivity boom.

Big investors will always gravitate towards any money-making venture that promises a profit rate above the average. Sometimes it results in over-investment in particular sectors or locations of production, in other cases it is blatant financial speculation, such as the wildly

when discussing the most recent asset-price bubble – the dramatic increase in house prices in the US, UK and other industrialised countries – and its inevitable bursting in the shape of the sub-prime mortgage debacle. It is also generally accepted that the Japanese authorities at the beginning of the 1990s, faced with both stockmarket and land price bubbles, were far too slow in reacting with monetary and fiscal measures to boost the economy and consequently the economic slowdown lumbered on for a decade.

Turner argues that Ben Bernanke at the US Federal Reserve was also too late in slashing interest rates, as the financial turmoil may have started in the summer of 2007 but the housing market had peaked almost two years earlier: the writing was on the wall. He also warns that Keynesian intervention may never be quite sufficient to drag an economy out of stagnation. One can only imagine what he thinks about the pathetic inactivity displayed by Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling!

But why did it happen? Turner’s answer is based on the relationship between personal debt, wages and the effects of globalisation. On debt, he gives the results of a simulation run by Oxford Economic Forecasting, where the rise in personal debt to disposable income is assumed to be at a lower rate

workers and financial corporations are experiencing massive losses resulting from the securitisation of the mortgage market, non-financial corporations generally have "solid balance sheets". The impact of the credit crunch on the non-financial sectors of the economy, construction apart, has been smaller to date than in previous recessionary periods. Profit rates are off their peaks but still well above the trough of the 1970s/80s.

Turner describes how multinational corporations have shifted manufacturing to the lower-cost emerging economies with pools of cheap labour in the scramble for greater profits. This has exerted downward pressure on wages in the industrialised west as domestic producers have to contend with cheaper imported goods and can always threaten workers with off-shoring.

This may be a factor, but wages as a proportion of GDP started to fall in the 1970s with the attacks on organised labour, before globalisation and the emergence of China and so forth.

Globalisation can be squarely

blamed for the growing global imbalances such as the large US current account deficit and accentuating the disproportional allocations of capital discussed earlier. The US trade balance is now improving as exports surge, probably to the surprise of Turner, but the UK may not be so fortunate after the decimation of manufacturing and an over-reliance on financial services.

Globalisation is certainly the biggest of his themes, but for Turner the historically unprecedented growth of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) barely registers; it will just add to capitalism's problems as wages are even lower and the global demand gap will widen further still.

The Marxist approach to crisis is quite different and rests on the primary importance of the rate of profit and, however uncomfortable it is to admit, global profit rates have been at their highest for decades. You wouldn't really expect to find such an analysis in this book, but nonetheless it is a thought-provoking read.

Graham Balmer

USSR regions help overcome this crisis; or will the pricking of the property bubble and enforced saving by western households precipitate a global recession, or at least decisively end the above-trend economic growth world capitalism of the last period?

In the final article in this collection Richard Brenner seeks to refute the theoretical underpinning of this magazine's analysis of the long upward wave of capitalist growth since the early-to-mid 1990s.

In several passages Brenner argues that Permanent Revolution did not foresee the credit crunch and now under-estimates its impact on the global economy. He suggests that the financial crisis' very appearance is a body blow to the idea that world capitalism has been enjoying a long upward curve of development.

It is true that we – along with everyone else bourgeois or Marxist – failed to foresee the specific form the financial crisis would take (i.e. the sub-prime mortgage crisis hitting banks holding securitised assets). But the view that the housing market in the US, UK and parts of Europe were in the throes of a bubble that would burst sooner or later, was commonly held among most observers.

We shall return to what impact it is having later, but that its very appearance refutes the notion that capitalism is in an ascendant phase is palpable nonsense.

The 1994 Mexican peso crisis, the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, the dotcom crash on Wall Street in 2000, the collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001 and now the credit crunch, have all been examples of the destabilising and destructive effect of financial capital flows. Through all these crises (leaving aside the current one, which we are in the middle of) world growth was checked and then continued its upward curve.

The unchecked expansion of forms of credit, the unregulated growth of foreign exchange transaction and short-term capital flows across borders, and the wild speculative investments made in

Myth or reality: debating long waves

**THE CREDIT CRUNCH –
A MARXIST ANALYSIS**

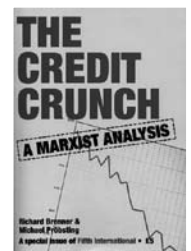
**Richard Brenner and
Michael Probsting**

LFI / 2008 / £5.00

THIS SPECIAL issue of the League for the Fifth International's (LFI) journal consists of a collection of articles on the unfolding credit crunch written over the last year or so, an article on Marx's theory of capitalist crisis, one on the relevance of Lenin's theory of imperialism and a polemic aimed at this magazine, attacking its analysis of the credit crunch and its view of the extended period of capitalist growth since the early 1990s.

At its 2003 International Congress the LFI confirmed its belief that world capitalism was mired in stagnation – at the start of what proved to be the strongest five years of growth experienced by the world economy in 40 years.

The credit crunch however has put wind in their sails. The worst financial crisis to hit the developed imperialist economies (or at least the Anglo-Saxon ones) in 60 years is testing the strength and durability of a long upward period of global capitalist growth. Will the economic reserves of imperialism, timely government interventions and the continued dynamism of the Asian, Latin American and ex-





shares, property or commodities – these are meat and drink to capitalism in the modern era of globalisation of the last 30 years or so.

They normally occur after a period of rapid capitalist expansion in which excess profits and new forms of fictitious capital pile into one favoured class of assets, producing a bubble that eventually bursts. In 1907 one of the greatest system-threatening banking collapses ever, took place in the USA (eventually giving rise to the creation of the Federal Reserve), causing a recession. But it took place, as have the financial crises of the last 15 years, in the middle of a long wave of capitalist expansion lasting from 1895 to the First World War.

The financial crises of the current era are notable for the fact that such crises are more likely to spread from their point of origin outwards, are more varied and more destabilising because of the massive growth of financial capital in relation to the “real economy”. Clearly this present financial crisis, centred as it is not in the Third World but in the heart of the imperialist financial system, contains a more systemic threat than say the Asian crisis 10 years ago. But is the unfolding of the credit crunch leading to such a general collapse (like the 1930s) or a more modest decline together with a realignment of economic power?

The south east Asian crisis (and its delayed effects in Latin America) was an opportunity for the G7 countries to organise a fire sale of assets and enrich their corporations. This crisis is allowing emerging centres of financial wealth in Asia and the Middle East to enlarge their wealth and power within the global system, the full effect of which will only be observable in the next phase of the cycle.

Will the financial system (and in its wake trade and investment) implode under the impact of the credit crunch? Or will the world economy resume its above-trend growth of recent years after taking

a relatively minor hit in some parts of the EU and the USA, as it did in 2000-02?

If the recessionary fall-out of the credit crunch (in terms of jobs and output lost, bankruptcies, decline in overseas investment etc) is in the same ball park as seven or eight years ago and much less than the 1970s and 1980s, or even early 1990s, then it will tend to confirm, as with 1907, that the underlying dynamism of the global economy has acted to contain the damage.

Long waves

The thrust of Brenner’s attack is aimed at challenging our view of this underlying dynamism. At first glance it appears a non-argument. He concedes much of our case:

“To be fair to Jeffries and Harvey . . . they have pointed to a major world-historic turning point altering the composition of capital.” (p133) He summarises in several places the combination of socio-economic factors we have pointed to that lay behind the extended upturn and says he agrees with them, and even that they have resulted in “strong booms and weak downturn phases in the USA and Britain between 1993 and 2007.” (p137). He accepts the fact of the unprecedented expansion of capitalism in China and the ex-USSR.

His objection is rather to the theoretical framework in which these facts are embedded. He argues that “long wave theory” originated by Kondratiev, rejected by Trotsky and (in Brenner’s opinion) revived and given a Marxist gloss by Ernest Mandel, is schematic. This is because Kondratiev’s theory insists a priori that upward and downward extended cycles (comprising of several industrial cycles) of capitalist development have to be comprised of roughly 50 years, roughly equally divided into periods of 25 years each.

Whereas the roughly 7-10 year industrial cycle does have an internal temporal dynamic governed by the replacement and wearing of fixed capital

investments, there is no such dynamic to long waves, either in the up or down phases, governed as they are by broad-scale, unpredictable socio-economic events such as war or revolutions. Hence the long upward phase opened up in the early 1990s has no logical reason to last for 25 years.

To be fair to Mandel, his work was mainly retrospective and Brenner does not challenge his view that the post-1815 world economy can indeed be divided up into these long 50-year periods up to the end of the long boom (1973); or does Brenner consider this chronology to be a schematic post-festum imposition on real history? Or do they indeed correspond to real historical periods, as Mandel and we agree?

Mandel did have the merit of predicting the end of the long boom a few years before it happened, based on his analysis (proof of the pudding etc?). But he refrained from predicting that the post-1973 downturn would end 25 years or thereabouts later, although he did sketch out some socio-economic conditions (à la Trotsky) that may combine to bring it to an end at some point.

What of Permanent Revolution? We share Mandel’s view (and Trotsky’s) that broad socio-historic factors lie behind the beginning of an upward phase. And so it appears does Brenner. But we also agree with Mandel that the end of a long upward phase occurs when the internal dynamics that have given rise to the above-trend rise in profitability (and hence broad expansion) whither away (or put another way, when the tendency for the rate of profit to fall reasserts itself over the countervailing tendencies).

We do not believe the upward phase has to last 25 years. We have tried to focus our analysis on the key internal (to the accumulation process) effects of the socio-economic transformation brought about by the collapse of the planned economies of China and the USSR (and the breaking down of barriers to India’s, Brazil’s and other major semi-colonies’

insertion into the global economy). Above all there has been the qualitative lowering of the organic composition of capital (OCC) in these states and a subsequent rise in profitability. In other words the incorporation of the 800 million-strong Chinese (low paid) workforce (larger than that of the EU, Japan and USA combined) into the world market has qualitatively boosted global capitalism.

We have argued that this lowering of the OCC will fall away over time, and the single biggest element in this process is the erosion of the surplus labour force in China, which will raise the OCC by pushing wages in China and elsewhere up.

Brenner believes that we have plucked the timescale this is projected to happen (around 2015) out of our head in order to conform to our a priori prejudice that an early 1990s start date for a long upward wave must end then.

But the matter of the transformations in the Chinese labour force is a matter of ongoing research and debate. Reflecting the current consensus, *The Economist* says the working age population rose 1.3% a year between 1996-2005. From then until 2015 it will do so at 0.7% per year and then shrink by 0.5% a year until 2025. At the same time the productivity lift will end as the shift from the land to the cities dwindles. However, one Chinese academic study suggests that by 2009 there would be widespread labour shortage, based on revising surplus labour estimates from 150-200 million to zero because of what kind of labour firms really want. Yet another study by Standard Chartered argues the number of 20-somethings are rising again and will increase by one-third up to 2015, easing wage pressure.

It is the temporal dynamics of these world-historic shifts in the global labour force that underpin our analysis.

Brenner objects to this and says it is our "core error". (p134) He rejects the idea that this verifiable shift in the OCC affects more than just China's profits. First, because while importing cheap components

from Asia to be used in US industry raises the latter's superprofits, it does not lower the OCC of US production. Correct, but the OCC of US-owned production in China is directly lowered by this process, accounting for an increasing amount of US manufacturing capital; moreover, the OCC of US domestic capital is lowered by the process of keeping wages inside the

have his cake and eat it.

Brenner ends with an exposition of the LFI's take on the period, which can be summarised as saying that while there has been rapid, world-historic changes in the world economy after 1993 and as a result massive capitalist expansion in Asia, this has not been enough to "break free from the structural over-accumulation of capital and

It won't have escaped the attention of the attentive reader that having started out with a critique of long wave theory Brenner ends up contesting us on precisely this terrain

USA stagnant or falling because of the pressure on US wages as a result of competition from abroad.

Brenner indeed accepts this: "Certainly for a time the associated effects of importing cheap goods and lowering the value of constant and variable capital in the west operated as countervailing tendencies to crisis." He just believes that this effect ended as Chinese inflation took off in 2007.

But it is not wage costs in the first instance that explain the rise in Chinese or global inflation, but the effect of rampant capitalist expansion on the global price of energy, raw materials and food. What is cyclical and structural in these increases remains to be seen, but it is clear that the downward pressure on global OCC from cheap Chinese labour has far from ended.

While we do not see eye to eye on this analysis it will not have escaped the attention of the attentive reader that having started out with a critique of our long wave theory for insisting on a temporal, wearing out explanation for the decline of the expansive phase of capitalist development, Brenner ends up contesting us on precisely this terrain; namely, whether and to what degree and over what timescale the countervailing tendencies that have boosted accumulation and the rate of profit, cease to have an effect. He obviously wants to

associated tendency to stagnation of productive labour that afflicted it in the 1973-90 period." (p137)

Concretely, he asserts that the growth rates in the US and Europe still exhibit a tendency towards stagnation and that the growth in Asia etc, does not compensate for that, ensuring that the 1992-2007 phase is "not an expansionary period characterised by a predominant trend towards the development of the productive forces worldwide."

Even if we were to allow for his partial and inaccurate picture of generalised over-accumulation and stagnation inside the G7, Brenner is blind to the fact that the rapid capitalist accumulation of capital in Asia – in the first instance under the spur of imperialist investment – is shifting the centre of gravity of capitalist production away from the metropolitan centres towards the old second and third world, and that the combined effect of this shift – on a global scale – has to date been to increase output, profits and productivity per head significantly above those of the pre-1992 period.

Brenner thinks he has refuted long wave theory: in fact he demonstrates his lack of understanding of it – a lack of comprehension brought on by a bad case of catastrophism.

Keith Harvey



A political archaeology of the US class struggle

**IN PRAISE OF BARBARIANS:
ESSAYS AGAINST EMPIRE**

Mike Davis

Haymarket / 2007 / £9.99

MIKE DAVIS is a professor of history at the University of California, and a leading Marxist in the US. His latest collection of essays, mainly collected from Socialist Review, covers a wide range of subjects: Inuit protestors in Greenland, the US's attempts at military global domination, Soviet fighters against fascism, cotton workers' strikes in the 1930s and a history of early terrorism.

Davis performs a kind of literary archaeology, excavating vignettes from both political writing and radical fiction, which chronicle the devastation wrought by imperialism, whether it's wedding parties bombed in Afghanistan or American workers losing their jobs and homes.

Davis rescues from beneath layers of rubble, rich gems of workers' history such as the New York labour insurrection of 1863, that was deflected and fatally divided into a racist pogrom, or the great textile workers' strikes of 1934 of the southern US states, mid-Atlantic and New England.

The central argument of the book is that the Bush plutocracy and Democratic aspirants to the presidency are but a temporary parasitic class that ultimately rests on sand. US capitalism may seem invincible but then so did Rome to the Romans. All around, it creates the forces that will overthrow it – immigrant labour forced into strikes, slum dwellers (the "outcast proletariat") living on less than a dollar a day in the shanty towns, the urban black poor left to drown in ecological disasters – in short a variegated working class not yet aware of itself as a class but, at the

margins, beginning to take action, gain confidence and learn lessons.

Another strand of the book is the weaving together of today's struggles with those of the past, drawing parallels and hinting at lessons: for example, from the International Workers of the World (IWW) "that mobilised a supposedly 'unorganisable' immigrant working class into militant confrontations with the nation's largest industrial corporations", showing how they assembled a mass movement with internationalism at its core, yet simultaneously rooted in labour struggles and working class communities.

At times, Davis' message may appear prematurely optimistic, though it does not gloss over some of the very real difficulties.

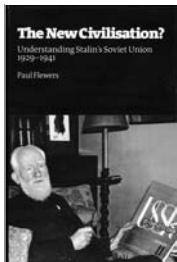
However, he doesn't explicitly

address how to overcome these weaknesses, so Davis at times lapses into a comforting narrative that the US imperialism is so full of Roman arrogance it is destined to fall.

This risks underestimating the disconnectedness of the left from the burning concerns and interests of different working class communities and the weakness of fragmented struggles in being able to bring down such a mighty edifice.

What saves the book, and makes it an interesting as well as entertaining read, is the quality of the writing. Gordon Brown is described as having a "clown-like smile glued to his eroded face"; rich metaphors of dark water rising, of fire and pestilence, revolting legions and anarchy punctuate the essays. Militants wanting to reconnect with a battered and divided working class, to revive class-wide rebellion and assemble the mass movements of the future – to learn from both the victories and defeats, would do well to read these essays.

Jason Travis



How British intellectuals viewed Stalin

**THE NEW CIVILISATION –
UNDERSTANDING STALIN'S SOVIET
UNION 1929-1941**

Paul Flanders

Francis Boutle / 2008 / £12.99

PAUL FLEWERS is a member of the Revolutionary History editorial board and over the years has contributed numerous articles on different strands of the left and their understanding of the ex-USSR. He expresses a preference for Hillel Ticktin's analysis of the class nature of the former Stalinist states, reflecting his years in the 1980s as a supporter of the Revolutionary Communist Party (now deceased).

This book is something of a

labour of love. Focusing on Britain, he provides an extremely comprehensive survey of the changing attitudes towards the Soviet Union in the period from the first Five Year Plan in 1929 to the Nazi invasion of 1941, focussed on the leftist intelligentsia, like the Webbs, Victor Gollancz, Victor Serge, George Orwell and Bertrand Russell.

The title of the book, New Civilisation, is taken from the Fabian tome of the same name by Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Originally published with a question mark in December 1935, by 1937 the great purges, show trials and Ukrainian famine had convinced them the question mark

was an unnecessary qualification and it was taken off! The New Civilisation had indeed been founded under the watchful eye of Uncle Joe.

The Webb's obsequious blindness to Stalinism's flaws was by no means unusual in the period, and a running narrative through Flewers' book is the contrast between the pro and anti-communist flanks of public opinion. Flewers also refers to a more critical "centre ground of opinion" – an odd description for Trotsky, Orwell, EH Carr and Victor Serge.

There is a bewildering assortment of views and counter-views, which leave the reader wondering what the hell was really going on and what any of these various opinions have to do with it in the first place? For example Flewers writes:

"There was a widespread sense that the Soviet Union was here to stay, even if this was only implicitly or reluctantly expressed . . . other observers felt that there would be some sort of convergence between a Soviet economy that accepted certain market measures and a capitalist world . . . The insistence of some [other] observers . . ." (p109)

And so on, and on . . .

Take his discussion of Trotsky's Revolution Betrayed. Flewers first presents it in his discussion as how "fulsome praise for the tremendous changes made in the Soviet Union was not limited to the pro-Soviet lobby." (p121) A strange way of introducing Trotsky's devastating critique of Stalinism. He says the book, while a "sharp denunciation of the Stalinist regime", "opened with a veritable rhapsody to the 'gigantic achievements in industry.'" This surely implies Trotsky had been misled by the achievements of the five year plan. Yet Flewers concedes that when considering the developments in production made during the first five year plans, the "statistics look impressive". (p138)

How can the description of "fulsome praise" be in any way appropriate to Trotsky's analysis, when, as Flewers points out, the Revolution Betrayed explained that

inside the USSR "social inequalities were deepening and becoming institutionalised, and it was now ruled by a privileged, totalitarian elite."

To compound the errors, Flewers adds that Trotsky believed:

"The Soviet economy contained contradictory trends, as the means of production were in the hands of the state, and were thus socialised and planned, whereas because of the relative backwardness of the society, the distribution of everyday goods was carried out through the market." (p134)

No he didn't. When Trotsky

referred to the bourgeois method of distribution, he was not suggesting that goods were distributed by the market, but rather that the bureaucracy plundered the output of the economy, siphoning off large parts of it to line its own nest, thus entrenching major social inequalities. The trouble is if a reviewer of this period can't even get this right, which is, after all, the major theoretical study of the period, made by one of its key figures, then its difficult to have much faith in the rest.

Bill Jefferies

FILM REVIEW

Terence Davies trilogy – of angels and gimps

**CHILDREN
MADONNA AND CHILD
DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION**

Dir. Terence Davies / 1976/80/83

THERE ARE many who believe Terence Davies to be the greatest living English filmmaker, his craftsmanship and poetic sensibility without equal. The Trilogy is not so much a catalogue of hardships but a stirring account of human dignity triumphing over emotional and spiritual confusion.

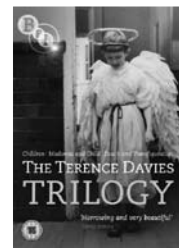
To encounter such work is always an unsettling, if exhilarating, experience: it tends to polarise opinion between those who are profoundly moved and those who hate every minute of the experience. The work of Terence Davies, quipped one critic, makes Ingmar Bergman look like Jerry Lewis.

Davies was born in 1945 in Liverpool. His was a deeply unhappy childhood; his family was poor, his father abusive and violent. He was educated in the pernicious traditions of Roman Catholicism and in his youth struggled to come to terms with his sexual feelings at a time when homosexuality was an

offence against God, the family, society and the law. All but two of the films Davies has made are set in the Liverpool of his youth, working through the themes which shaped his progress into adulthood. He is greatly influenced by T S Eliot's "Four Quartets" – a meditation on time and memory – and in the medium of film Davies has found a way to evoke his own memories of the past and his fears for the future.

Earlier this year the BFI released The Terence Davies Trilogy – three short films with which Davies began his directing career. The films were shot some years apart, in 1976, 1980 and 1983 and as Davies progressed from one to the other he grew more skilful in his directing, more ambitious in his compositions and had slightly higher budgets with which to work.

He recalls his amazement when he was given the £3,000 it cost to place a recording of Doris Day singing "It all depends on you" over the opening sequence of the third film in the trilogy; the first two films have barely any soundtrack at all. And it is by that third film, "Death and Transfiguration", that the fully fledged filmmaker is born who would go on to make the two





feature length masterpieces that followed: *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*. For unlike others mining the experiences of their hard-bitten youths and with wider polemics in mind, like Ken Loach, Davies works best when he is free to juxtapose contrasting images and to counterpoise these

the interior of a Catholic cathedral with an ethereal choir singing as, on the soundtrack, we hear Robert on the phone asking a tattooist to tattoo his bollocks: we are given a professional's insight into the many pitfalls of such an undertaking before the tattooist, disarmed by Robert's continued insistence on

gun is a British actor with a gun – I imagine the pitches he makes to hapless producers would be well worth filming by themselves.

Maybe of even more lasting significance – who knows – is that all these beautiful autobiographical explorations have not, it seems, proved all that cathartic. Being gay, says Davies, has ruined his life – he is celibate by choice and lives to work.

Having not got a film made in eight years, Davies was finally commissioned to direct *Of Time and the City* as part of the celebration of Liverpool as European City of Culture. Given how ambivalent Davies' depiction of his home town has been there is perhaps an irony in choosing him to represent the place once more on film. Still, the city has produced no finer filmmaker and by all accounts, *Of Time and the City* is a richly beautiful and rewarding piece from this poetic of British directors (and with a generously funded soundtrack to boot.)

The film will be on general release in November, with a couple of earlier showings in October as part of the London Film Festival.

Dave Boyer

His films are not descriptions of a life, nor do they rail against its injustices. They are meditations on childhood, middle age and death

images with music. His films are not descriptions of a life, nor do they rail against its injustices. They are meditations on childhood, middle age and death.

The trilogy follows Davies' alter-ego, Robert Tucker. The first film, *Children*, finds Robert tossed between the casual violence of a grim small-minded school and the traumas of a loveless home ruled over by an ill and violent-tempered father. The pre-pubescent inklings of his sexuality in the showers of his local swimming baths give way to his older Robert, aged 23, receiving a repeat transcription for depression from his GP, who then asks him "still no interest in girls, son?" The closing section of the film spends rather too long dwelling upon the death of his father although this does draw out a remarkably nuanced performance from the young Robert (Phillip Maudsley), at once pleased and distraught at the old man's passing.

The middle film of the trilogy, *Madonna and Child* opens with beautiful images of the river Mersey at dawn as the ferry transports Robert to his office job (Davies left school at sixteen and spent ten years as a shipping clerk and accountant before going to Drama School).

Now Robert cares for his aging mother while snatching vicarious pleasure in the company of male prostitutes. The most startling and amusing scene has the camera pan

going through with it, cries shy of the job and hangs up; and all the while the camera lingers on a beneficent Virgin Mary.

The last of the trilogy, *Death and Transfiguration*, is the most expressionistic of the set, focused on the twin poles of Robert's life, as a little boy playing an angel in the school nativity play ("Do you love God, child?" asks his Mother Superior) and on the death throes of the elderly Robert (beautifully acted by Wilfred Brambell in his last ever role), still surrounded by clucking nuns – Catholicism seeping into every nook and cranny of Robert's long bitter life. It is a recording of Davies' own mother singing as Robert stretches out his arms and the bright light is extinguished – the death of Robert and of God.

This harrowing and very beautiful trio of films ought to have set Davies upon a long and glorious career but it has never quite materialised. Partly this reflects the myopia of an industry that obliges directors to accommodate the vagaries of a commercial industry but it would be a mistake to blame it all on that.

Films as personal as the work of Davies have never been abundantly financed, here or elsewhere. Davies won't conform to the norms of film narrative. He sees, he says, no reason why there should be a climax on page six of the screenplay and insists that the only thing more embarrassing than an actor with a