REVIEWS

What is to be Done Today?

Werner Bonefeld and Sergio Tischler, eds, *What is to be Done? Leninism, Anti-Leninist Marxism and the Question of Revolution Today*, Ashgate, 2002. Hardback, 222pp, £45.00.

Reviewed by Derek Kerr

DESPITE THE resurgence of various "anti-" movements across the globe, there appears to be a disinterest in the revolutionary project. Some of these movements parade under the banner of "anti-globalisation" raising questions over their intentions. Are they anti-capitalist, and if so, are they also revolutionary? This is the important question raised by the editors, Werner Bonefeld and Sergio Tischler. As they argue, the critique of globalisation fails if it is merely a critique for the national state or for productive accumulation as against (global) financial accumulation. Such movements, to be more than merely reactionary, must entail a critique of the capitalist form of social reproduction. If they are anti-capitalist then they must also be revolutionary.

The disinterest in revolution has meant that the centenary of Lenin's *What is to be Done?* in 2002 has largely gone unnoticed. While the indifference to Leninism is understandable, this should not lead to an abandonment of the revolutionary project; Leninism should not be equated with revolution. As the editors put it: "The theory and practice of revolution has to be emancipated from its Leninist legacy.... Against the contemporary indifference to the project of human emancipation, the principle of hope in the society of the free and equal has to be rediscovered" (pp.3, 7). This book is engaged in this practice of rediscovery through a critique of Leninism and an engagement with what the revolutionary project means today. It is in three parts and comprises eleven chapters.

Part One is entitled "*What is to be Done?* in Historical and Critical Perspective". It examines the theoretical roots of Leninism, the tradition of anti-Leninist Marxism and elaborates Marx's conception of labour as the constitutive force of communism. Significantly, this Part starts, not with a theoretical critique of Leninism, but with a practical and historical critique – a point of departure that resonates throughout the book. It comes in the form of Cajo Brendel's account of the proletarian uprising of 1921 in Kronstadt against Bolshevik rule. This forced the Bolshevik Party to show its true colours as an institution that was openly hostile to workers and whose single purpose was the establishment of state capitalism. The uprising was not simply a rejection of Bolshevik claims to power, but also a questioning of the traditional Bolshevik conception of Party and of the role and place of the Party as such. Its message was clear. Human emancipation could not be achieved through Party rule, but only through the struggle of workers against all such impositions. As Cajo Brendel emphasises, this message is not simply of historical interest, but of "practical importance for today's generations of workers" (p.14).

In the following chapter, Diethard Behrens contextualises Lenin's political-theoretical conceptions against the background of the debates in the German Social-Democratic Party and reviews the arguments of the anti-Leninist tradition, including Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek. Next, Simon Clarke uncovers the populist roots of Leninism. Lenin's transformation of Plekhanov's political theory was, according to Clarke, not in the direction of Marxism. Rather, it assimilated Plekhanov's Marxism back into the populist traditions from which Lenin had emerged. In the final chapter of this Part, Mike Rooke argues that, in contrast to Lenin, Marx's work expressed a "post-philosophical dialectics of labour" (p.77). Communism for Marx was not an ideal or a utopia, but a practical movement whose aim is the regaining of control by the direct producers of their labour and its product. Lenin's materialism, in contrast, was dualist. His conception of theory was one in which it stands in a contemplative relation to the object, to which it is applied from the outside. This is illustrated in Lenin's *What is to be Done?* Here lies the germ of the later substitutionism of the Bolshevik Party in power.

Part Two, entitled "What is to be Learned? Contemporary Capitalism and the Politics of Negation", offers a critique of Leninism through an appraisal of contemporary capitalist developments. Alberto Bonnet offers a critique of Leninist theory of imperialism against the background of globalisation. For Bonnet, the phenomenon that marks the distinction between contemporary capitalism and post-war capitalism is the expansion and socialisation of debt. This new mode of the command of money-capital must be dialectically

interpreted as an expression of the antagonism between capital and labour. Through the insubordination of labour, the notion of command is defetishised (practically) as the "*command-in-crisis of money capital*" (p.103). Bonnet continues by providing an interesting account of the contradictory movement of this "command-in-crisis" in Latin America.

Werner Bonefeld, in his chapter "State, Revolution and Self-Determination", furthers the critique of Leninism. He argues that Marx's conception of communism as a classless society is turned upside down in Leninism. The Leninist idea of society as a centrally planned factory, and of humans as socialised factors of production whose ability to think and dream has been displaced by the internalisation of Party-rule, mirrors and reinforces the capitalist existence of human social practice as a mere personification of exchange relations. The masses are allowed to be as free as the Party decrees and not as the masses determine. Any attempt at freedom, of self-determination, on the part of the dependent masses (as in Kronstadt, 1921) is seen, with necessity, as a counter-revolutionary threat. In contradistinction, communism for Marx cannot be decreed, nor is it government on behalf of the people. Human emancipation cannot be imposed. It is the self-activity of the social individuals who determine their affairs themselves as autonomous social subjects. Furthermore, as Bonefeld argues, communism does not come after the revolution. The society of the free and equal has already to be present in the consciousness and practice of the dependent masses and has to achieve material existence in the revolutionary movement itself.

George Caffentzis, in his chapter "Lenin on the Production of Revolution", argues that the anti-globalisation movements in the early twenty-first century can find something useful in Lenin's *What is to be Done?* This, apparently, resides in Lenin's communicative model of revolutionary organisation. As Caffentzis rightly points out, Lenin's *What is to be Done?* is hardly a good model for anti-globalisation organisation in general. It is too riddled with elitism and suspicion of democratic procedures. Yet, argues Caffentzis, Lenin's insistence on the need for putting the proletarian body in touch with all its members and his assessment of the need to have activists capable of outwitting a concerted police strategy of disinformation has even greater resonance today when revolution must be planetary or nothing. Caffentzis takes to task Hardt and Negri who, in their recent book, *Empire*, reject such a project. Caffentzis concludes that they may have provided poetry, but not a refutation of the communication model of revolutionary production.

Sergio Tischler announces Leninism as the reification of class struggle. The notions that "true" class struggle is centred in the Party, and that class consciousness comes to the labour movement "from the outside", belong to a theorisation that separates subject from object. This produces a reified notion of class struggle. Instead, Tischler draws upon Rosa Luxemburg's interpretation of class-as-struggle. Socialism is conceived as an ongoing process, as a struggle destined to abolish capitalist society starting from the self-organisation of the workers. Revolutionary dialectics embodies this act of negation starting from self-organisation. Unlike the idea of a separate party that perpetuates or consolidates class, self-organisation is a process of class negation as a result of struggle. In this movement the class affirms itself by negating itself. Tischler proffers the Zapatista uprising as a practical rendering of the defetishisation of class. Utterances such as "to command by obeying" or struggling until "we are no longer needed", imply a concept of struggle that does not conclude in taking over power or the state. Far from rejecting the concept of class struggle, they bring forward the consciousness of the need to re-elaborate it, to give it new, non-instrumental, non-positivist, meaning.

Part Three, "What about Revolution? Ends and Means", contains two contributions. Johannes Agnoli offers a critique of institutional politics and elaborates how such politics either affirms or mirrors existing conditions. This raises the means-end relationship. If the goal is human emancipation, then it is necessary to reflect in precise terms whether the means are really suitable to this end. The experience of the 1968 movement is instructive. It was able to exert political influence only for as long as it did not participate in a direct and immediate sense in state politics. What is certain is that the organisation of emancipatory negation must function without any form of central committee, oligarchy or hierarchy. The organisation must anticipate the goal of emancipation and determine its character on the basis of this goal. How this is possible cannot be determined theoretically. It is a practical question only to be realised in and through practical activity.

In the final chapter, "Revolt and Revolution *Or* Get out of the Way, Capital!", John Holloway questions the hitherto notion of revolution. This implied direct confrontation, usually taking place at the level of the state. However, direct confrontation means adopting a mirror image of the enemy and this cannot achieve the end of human emancipation. Like Johannes Agnoli, John Holloway argues that the means must be appropriate to the end; the two are internally related. Our strength lies not in working through

capitalist structures but in developing forms of action and forms of relations that do not dovetail with the capitalist forms. Revolution, according to Holloway, is not the struggle to take power from them, but rather the movement of our own power, the movement of power-to (i.e. the social flow of doing). "Our movement is negative, a movement-against, but it is not an empty negativity, rather a negativity filled with the assertion of our power-to against that which negates and fractures it" (p.203). But, as Holloway notes, the notion of revolution as the movement of "power-to" is still very abstract and in some ways is more a question than a statement. He does, however, offer a number of suggestions. These include the corollary that the movement of power-to against its own fracturing cannot take place through the state, since the state itself is part of that fracturing; it also means not following the agenda of capital.

What then is the significance of this book? It is written in an engaging style and is full of hope. It clearly is a book for those passionately concerned with realising the emancipatory potential inherent in the here and now. True to its own critique, it offers no blueprints, no revolutionary dogmas to follow. It does not stand outside the fray, but is itself immersed in the practice of rediscovery. Its place in this practice is captured through the following quote from John Holloway. "Revolutionary theory can only be the recuperation of our own exclusive subjectivity, our own power-to-do; not that theory can recover our subjectivity on its own, but that it makes sense only as part of the struggle to do so" (p.205). In this "struggle to do so", communication is obviously fundamental. However, it was not clear to this reviewer why George Caffentzis felt the need to rescue a "communication model" from Lenin's work. In this respect, this chapter appeared to sit uneasily with the rest. This is a small quibble. The book deserves to be widely read.

What is Global Justice?

Chris Brazier, ed., *Raging Against the Machine: 30 Years of Campaigning for Global Justice*, New Internationalist, 2003. Paperback, 265pp, £9.99.

Reviewed by Terry Sheen

OVER THE years I have often looked through the pages of *New Internationalist*, finding interesting stories that throw some light on events in a region or explanatory pieces on complex issues of development. *NI* tends to present a range of ideas, and fosters debate rather than laying down analysis. Does *NI* have any analysis of the world? Often I would come away from *NI* somewhat perplexed, wondering what these people were really thinking. So reading this volume, which celebrates *NI*'s first 30 years, I wondered if any greater clarity would emerge. What indeed had *NI* to say after 30 years?

This book collects together some of *NI*'s most influential pieces, grouped in various sections: analysis, campaigns, ideas, gender, environment, personal stories, development, travel. The editor highlights the writing of Wolfgang Sachs who argues that development had become an amorphous term and notes the assumption within much developmental thinking that the developers are in front and above those lacking development. This explains why *NI* changed its mission statement, which used to refer to world development, to its current statement that refers to campaigning for global justice: "Our multi-award winning magazine, *New Internationalist*, brings to life the people, the ideas and the action in the fight for global justice."

But who is to provide this justice? *NI* has also published a series of *No Nonsense Guides* which come closer to brass tacks: the *NNG* on *Fair Trade* defines fair trade in terms which include the protection and fair treatment of workers, and their right to join trade unions. So is this a justification for buying fair trade coffee? Maybe, but it only provides some improvement in conditions for the managers and workers. Fair Trade has to operate within market conditions over which it has little influence. It can improve conditions within a margin of commercial viability defined by market conditions, but it does not alter the nature of the market in "Third World" commodities or the market in Third World commodity workers.

One doesn't have to go from *NI*'s Oxford office to Latin America to find this reality – a recent *Bookseller* (28 March 2003, p.5), reported that 50 workers had been dismissed from the Milton Keynes based UK Amazon, which has been frequently listed in *NI* as a source for books they review. The *Bookseller* reported that internal checks at the distribution centre "found" that the warehouse workers could not supply birth certificates, passports or work permits. Amazon declined to say whether it had carried out eligibility checks when the workers were taken on. One can easily imagine what was going on behind this report.

An understanding of such reality is missing from the *NNG* series title on *Class*, where Jeremy Seabrook concludes with "if the dictatorship of the proletariat is dead, this is only, perhaps to make way for a wider emancipation of **humanity**". Such writing from an author calling for common endeavour between classes makes sense if one runs a small business like *NI*, and such talk is the natural politics of "progressive" businesses and

their friends in the Green Party. But under and beyond this progressive talk lies a reality in which workers in companies, sub-contractors, and business partners, are treated as badly as businesses can get away with. In such a context justice means only that the powerful dispense the justice they choose to "afford" to the powerless. Thus "justice" is a step back from the concept of development, with its connotations of structural, systematic and empowering change.

Missing in *Raging...* is any reporting on how workers have tried to develop their own organisations. It is at this point that *NI* has less to say – it proposes little in the way of systemic change, it gives little emphasis to changes in power within societies, it gives little priority to providing understanding of progress in organisation amongst those who might seek to counter the power of the market with their own alternative systemic priorities. *NI* is, in short concerned not with the systemic development of alternatives to market capitalism, but rather with the nastier aspects of life within this system; it wants justice to deal with the symptoms of the unacceptable face of capitalism, it doesn't seek to cure the disease that creates those symptoms. Faced with a critique of the concept of development, it preferred a post-modernist retreat towards single issue campaigns, personal development and anecdotal comment, rather than the working towards an on-going systemic change correcting and reversing the Euro-centric and chauvinist assumptions of many developers.

Chris Brazier pokes fun at the left, celebrates *NI*'s success surviving 30 years, and credits *NI*'s business efficiency. Critical readers may not mind his humour, but they may well see in the *New Internationalist* and in this anthology a comfortable organisation that makes its money by selling pretty images of "people" in the Third World, that talks justice, but has little or nothing to contribute toward systemic change.

Weather Report

The Weather Underground. Film directed by Sam Green and Bill Siegel. USA, 2003, 92 minutes.

Reviewed by Louis Proyect

CURRENTLY SHOWING at the Film Forum in New York City, *The Weather Underground* now joins *Rebels With a Cause* as a worthy and unstinting documentary about the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In this case, the focus is on the ultra-ultraleft faction that evolved from scatterbrained street confrontations with the cops into terrorist bombing attacks on government buildings.

Naming itself after the line "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows" in Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues", the group was trying to convey its belief that global revolution was an inescapable fact. That, at least, was the way things seemed in 1970. Implicitly, the choice of this line betrayed the middle-class impressionism of a layer of the student movement that preferred raw action to theory and long-term strategic thinking. Despite lip service to the Cuban, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions, these activists had never advanced beyond the unsophisticated New Left ideology of the early SDS. In the final analysis, the Weathermen were simply involved in moralistic protests that used bombs instead of candles.

The film effectively crosscuts interviews with veterans of the Weather Underground and stock footage of their press conferences from the 1970s, when they were in the news as much as the Black Panthers or the Yippies. With no exceptions, Bernardine Dohrn, Mark Rudd, Brian Flanagan, David Gilbert, Bill Ayers, Naomi Jaffe, Todd Gitlin and Laura Whitehorn – now all in their fifties and sixties – come across as rueful, chastened and ashamed. While none have turned to the right, they give the impression of people who are more or less politically exhausted.

Unfortunately, co-directors Sam Green and Bill Siegel have drawn upon former SDS leader Todd Gitlin to provide commentary on the sad spectacle of the Weather Underground. While many of his points seem unexceptionable, the implicit message is that he was an alternative to the course that they took. As most people are aware, Gitlin was never a radical to begin with and denounced the antiwar movement for not supporting Hubert Humphrey in 1968. Today his main claim to fame is writing articles in the bourgeois press attacking the ANSWER coalition, the Nader candidacy for president and any other outbursts of radicalism to the left of the Democratic Party.

When Naomi Jaffe first appeared on the screen, I was startled to see how much she looked like her mother who lived in the next village from me in the 1950s. The Jaffes were part of a group that had been witch-hunted out of teaching and other professions in New York City. This group included the parents of her cousin Allen Young, who became a New Left leader himself. After launching Liberation News Service, he became a pioneer gay activist. When we were in high school, other villagers viewed the Jaffes, the Youngs *et al* with suspicion. Not only were they reputed to be pro-Soviet, they were also rumored to have inter-racial parties at their homes, where blacks and whites danced with each other.

Although I never really had much contact with her, I used to see Naomi Jaffe at the New School in New York City in 1965 to 1967, when she and I were graduate students. I distinctly recall her hanging out with SDS'ers in the cafeteria where every other word out of their mouths seemed to be about revolution. When I began to become radicalized, I had little interest in idle chatter and found myself drawn to the Maoist Progressive Labor Party (PLP) and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP), groups that seemed much more disciplined and serious.

When I discovered that PLP's main area of activity was SDS, I naturally chose to join the SWP since they were spearheading the antiwar coalitions. Even though SDS organized the first antiwar demonstration in 1965, they had decided within a year or so that this was not radical enough. At least, this is what leaders like Bernadine Dohrn, Bill Ayers and Mark Rudd thought. Many rank-and-file SDS'ers continued to organize demonstrations on local campuses, paying scant attention to the empty bombast of their leaders.

Frustration with the inability of the mass demonstrations to end the war led to an escalation of tactical militancy. This was the signature of the Weathermen, even before they went underground. The film shows Bill Ayers walking along the street in a wealthy Chicago neighborhood that the Weathermen chose as their battleground during the Days of Rage back in 1969. Proclaiming that thousands of angry youth would join their window-breaking rampage, less than 200 hard-core Weathermen and their supporters were beaten senseless by the cops, while six were shot.

Ayers explains why they organized such an adventurist action. He says that they were tired of playing by the cops' rules, which meant getting a parade permit, staying within designated routes, etc. It was necessary to challenge all this in a kind of tug-of-war between "revolutionaries" and the forces of law and order. Victory would not be measured by the size of the demonstration or the numbers of working people won to the antiwar movement, but by the numbers of windows broken.

Unfortunately, this sort of illogic has never completely disappeared. In a *Counterpunch* article, Benjamin Shepard, who had already written a misty-eyed review of Bill Ayers' memoir in *Monthly Review*, complains:

"Instead of involving itself in any of the exciting or fresh direct action stuff which involves not getting a police permit or lining up speakers to preach to the converted, ANSWER was doing their best ground hog day routine pushing for its third march in DC in six months."

While Shepard is not as addled as the Black Block types, who seem intent on elevating "Days of Rage" tactics to a principle, he doesn't seem to understand the purpose of demonstrations. They are not designed to raise the adrenaline level of participants, but to convince others to take part. It was only when antiwar demonstrations in the USA reached a critical mass in the USA during the late 1960s and early 1970s that imperialism was forced to retreat from an all-out military solution. If none of the demonstrations seemed "exciting" or "fresh" to some autoworker watching at home on his or her television, this was besides the point. The whole point was to make it as *easy* as possible for them to participate. While tear gas and billy club attacks might make for breathless "I was there" type narratives in ensuing weeks, they are not calculated to win fresh troops for the cause. If anything, it was the exhaustion of tactical street militancy that led the Weathermen to opt for bombing attacks.

When all this was going on, we Trotskyists felt a certain kind of smug vindication. The Weathermen were being driven into the underground and obscurity, while we had over 1500 members and branches in every city in the country. While the Weathermen had failed to appreciate the importance of the antiwar movement, we were capitalizing on it and poised for future growth.

If the failure to effectively put an end to the Vietnam War had caused a section of the New Left to implode, the end of the Vietnam War eventually led my own movement to implode as well. Leaving the Film Forum, I meditated on the tendency of leftwing groups to go haywire. What did the SDS and the SWP have in common? It is now clear to me that they shared an utter inability to view themselves critically. If the SDS Weathermen could not objectively assess the political impact of their ultraleftism, the SWP was not much better. Announcing in 1976 that the working class in the USA was more radical than at any time in the 20th century, the party leaders – who were as pigheaded in their own way as Bill Ayers and Bernadine Dohrn – dispatched the membership into factories and out of the mass movement, where they had been so effective.

By the late 1970s virtually the entire Weather Underground had resurfaced and surrendered to the cops. This was exactly the same moment that the American Trotskyist movement had decided to go underground metaphorically speaking. In revolutionary politics, fantasy is a deadly enemy, whether it is about "bringing the war home" or about "lines of march" involving an industrial proletariat that has not even begun to move.

This review originally appeared on the Marxism Mailing List (www.marxmail.org) and is reproduced with permission.