

Capitalist realism renewed - James Butler



James Butler responds to a Mark Fisher article on 'neo-anarchism'.

Some quick thoughts on Mark Fisher's [recent piece for the *Weekly Worker*](#) on the present state of things, and 'neo-anarchism' in particular. One brief thought on presentation: whoever the CPGB's layout person is, they've thought it incisive to caption a photo of students at Millbank with 'Neo-anarchism: how not to win'; in fact, this is probably the worst possible photo to choose to illustrate the point. Perhaps a better choice would be a series of inchoate hippies in Guy Fawkes masks. Anyway...

1. I don't think it's possible to quarrel with Fisher's broad presentation of where we stand: I outlined a [similar view](#) of the current state of things ahead of October 20th. Where we would likely differ is over precisely how useful unions have been in the past; I suggest that much of the story of unions in the twentieth century has been one of tension between their administrative, representative and associative roles, with the administrative function ultimately winning out. Perhaps we would also differ on the usefulness of the mediatory function of unions, which I would suggest also exhibits a tendency to remain content in weakness, and often hobbles struggles before they begin. The other crisis to bring out here is the decline in party membership across all parliamentary factions: I suggest that this is a symptom of a generalised sense of disengagement from formal politics which rests on the assumption that those who govern us merely exist to further their own ends, and administer capitalism in largely similar variations. A generalised but justified cynicism, in other words.

2. I take Fisher's use of 'neo-anarchism' to mean the array of political techniques and methods that emerged out of the anti-capitalist movement. These could be briefly characterised as involving 'consensus' decision-making, intermittent spectacular protests, an opposition to traditional models of organisation, and a frequent hostility or disregard for 'theory'. If we were to impute an *implicit* theory of this kind of politics, it would probably involve a radical secessionism from the state, prefiguration of a new order of politics, and a disengagement from the economic in preference for the ethical. Graeber outlines some of the distinctive features of this movement in an *NLR* piece on '[The New Anarchists](#)', from 2006. It is justified to say these movements did not achieve their external political goals, and introduced particular and intractable problems to the far left, primarily the glorification of marginality. Whether or not there is any value to 'prefiguration' as a political practice (and I don't think it's without merit), the witness of the last few decades would suggest it certainly isn't sufficient.

3. As with all things prefaced with 'neo-', this kind of folk anarchism is nonetheless deeply implicated in the history of the century that preceded it. Its roots are quite a lot deeper than its emergence into the spotlight in the 1990s, and it is worth trying to understand it not as a 'left' mirror of neoliberal work practices (I think Fisher has been reading Jodi Dean here, and there is some substance to it), but *also* as a reaction to the failures of both capitalism and the broad range of communist struggles against it that preceded its formulation. Equally, there is perhaps a problem in suggesting that left

political practice always mirrors capital's innovations, rather than the reverse. Can we not, too, innovate? The word 'recuperation' should be on our lips. Teasing out its precise genealogy is beyond my scope here, but I would suggest if its prominence in the extraparliamentary left is a symptom, its antidote is not a simple return to other, older models.

4. Fisher is right to see, in the Occupy movement as elsewhere, a kind of left secessionism that thinks a withdrawal from all of civil society is the first stage of a solution to the current problem. There are multiple ethical, semi-religious and political strands to this belief that can be examined, but the substantive political question that confronts it is always: secession from what and to where? But we might greet this with an equally stringent critique of 'left nostalgia' in practice: the use of the political forms of 1917 in a world unrecognisable to that era. It does not seem to me that the belief in the coming renaissance of the mass party in its classical form is any less a case of starry dreaming than the belief that we can secede from capital.

5. The two components of this critique that are most interesting to me are on the abandonment of the parliamentary terrain, and the ceding of mass media representation. On the former, I am more cynical than Fisher – though the question 'if parliament is irrelevant, why do capitalists spend so much to influence it?' is a good one. Maybe a fuller account of this wouldn't involve an anxiety about the representation of labour in parliament, but the way in which capitalists compete against each others' interests, intensified as the lack of new productive terrain means a race at the margins. Equally, some concentration on the pre- and post-political careers of those at Westminster yields some useful examples – Simon Stevens's post-Blair career in private healthcare and his role in the destruction of the NHS, for instance. Was there ever a golden age in parliament? I'd answer no, of course, but there is a case to be made that the post-Thatcher ideological shift and the collapse of the Soviet Union has meant the sense of tangible *possibility* of a different mode has evaporated. That is to say, the sense of the *contingency* of capitalism on which opposition depends is less in evidence now than it was then, save when it emerges under the banner of generalised apocalypse: to end capital would be to end everything. Fisher makes this case very well.

6. It is on media hegemony that Fisher's case is the most interesting, and the terrible consequence of left secessionism is the rise of projects devoted to the left talking to the left, rather than speaking to a broader audience. But after the struggles for airtime he references, what are we left with? And why is it that nothing politically intelligent ever graces our airwaves? I don't think it's just the left-secessionism I've been discussing here, but the removal of all kinds of serious contention over ideas from television. If we grant that there is a cynicism about politics, then there is also a cynicism about the integrity of the truncated and gestural 'debates' that we see on news programmes. The question to ask is surely whether there is a structural resistance to anything else among commissioning editors. The answer is, surely, yes. Fisher is a defender of Owen Jones against a lot of the cynicism and bile he receives from the far left, and there is something really worthwhile in that defence. Nonetheless, Jones' socialism is of a kind that would have once been thought of as workaday, even relatively centrist – especially in its uncritical evaluation of employment and democracy – and it might be thought of as a sign of our poor times that he is thought of as a far-left firebrand. Some of this is positioning, doubtless – there are certain views that get you plain booted from the BBC – but what is the trade-off here? If we wanted to recapture media hegemony (and let's argue more widely about exactly why this is a necessary thing), what kind of Faustian deal is necessary, and what price is acceptable to pay? And are there certain, less easily altered, forms of media presentation that would reduce us to the comedy communist in the corner?

7. There is a wider question about the composition of the class and its relation to capital that Fisher touches on by reference to the failures of the left to deal with post-Fordism properly. As elsewhere, I'd suggest we're now really seeing the emergent crisis of a fragmented class presented with (a) a political system with no serious accountability to the people it governs, (b) a service-led economy where employers can only retain profits by increasing regimentation, regulation, work-discipline,

wage-gutting and margin-boosting, (c) an ever-more-distant but also universally visible ruling class. This conjuncture ought to be political dynamite, but save a few flashes here and there, the powder's not really been lit. In this, the attraction of 'neo-anarchism' becomes clear: it offers a promise of action against everything, as well as a freedom to act now. Despite its limitations, the allure of this political form should be understood. It's worth mentioning the *other* anarchism which emerges out of the twentieth century, that of the Solidarity Federation, or Anarchist Federation, and myriad other anarchist-influenced projects, which try to deal with this head-on, without giving in to the mysticism of secession. In this respect, [the new SolFed pamphlet](#) is very much worth reading.

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