



Thoughts on
what Covid-19
means for the
crisis of the left



The stuff
that dreams
are made of
Davy Jones

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Initial thoughts on what the crisis of Covid-19
means for the crisis of the left

By Davy Jones

Published by **MUTINY**

What's up?

It's a funny old world. When I started to write this, we were all locked down and pissed off, as Covid-19 threw another spanner into the works of a society that seems to be more spanner than actual works these days. Then – boom! – in May 2020, revolt exploded, first in Minneapolis, quickly spreading through the United States, then globally.

This pamphlet isn't about that – at least not directly – and was written before the current uprising. It is, though, very much about how we get the most out of it, as antiracists, workers and socialists.

Over the past decade, a resurgent left put the idea of socialism back on the agenda – Corbyn in the UK, Sanders in the US, back through Podemos and Syriza. But, as the Labour left eats itself and seems largely oblivious to the current anti-racist upsurge of Black Lives Matter, that incarnation of socialism seems to have passed its high water mark. We need to overcome the limitations of these movements: to turn organisation on its head, and start from the actual experience of workers.

How did we get into this? More importantly, how do we get out? These are organisational questions, and organisation is directly political. What follows is an attempt to grapple with the implications of this for our time, and chart a way forward.

Davy Jones
June 2020

Like a fist when you open your hand

Here we sit, locked in, telling one another stories, like the bright young aristocrats in Boccaccio's fourteenth century classic, *The Decameron*, filling the days until the plague passes. Except not so bright or young in my case, and a cruel twist of fate robbed me of my aristocratic birth right.

And then what? What's on the other side of this?

It can't be business as usual – the world will have changed. But, with the United Nations warning of a famine of Biblical proportions, the possibility for this disease to be embedded within the fabric of society, and the likelihood of the greatest economic crisis ever (oh, and climate change – let's not forget that), this isn't the birth of a terrible beauty that WB Yeats heralded in his poem, *Easter 1916*. It's more like the warning his contemporary, the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci gave: that the old world is dying, but the new one is too weak to be born. Monsters abound.

The world is in crisis – health, economic, social. Throw in the underlying climate crisis, and you have an all-round existential clusterfuck. The word 'crisis', in all its facets, fits few situations so well as this one:

Crisis: late Middle English (denoting the turning point of a disease):
medical Latin, from Greek *krisis* 'decision', from *krinein* 'decide'.

That just about covers it. Crises, like the disease this one is wrapped up in, can break in a number of ways. And, while we are seeing a lot of spontaneous social solidarity, there is no guarantee it will leave a positive imprint when we emerge blinking into the light – whenever and however that might be.

One danger in all of this is that we continue to normalise the abnormal and dehumanising conditions that led us here, and those measures that an increasingly dysfunctional capitalist system takes to continue dragging its zombie-like form onwards.

The parable of Flitcraft

To illustrate this, let's move our literary metaphor six centuries forward from those Florentine aristocrats of *The Decameron*, to a novel by the creator of noir, the communist Dashiell Hammett.

The story of Flitcraft is related by private detective Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. This is how Spade tells it:

A man named Flitcraft had left his real estate office, in Tacoma, to go to luncheon one day and had never returned... His wife and children never saw him again... 'He went like that,' Spade said, 'like a fist when you open your hand ...

Well, that was in 1922. In 1927 I was with one of the big detective agencies in Seattle. Mrs Flitcraft came in and told us somebody had seen a man in Spokane who looked a lot like her husband. I went over there. It was Flitcraft, all right... He had an automobile business that was netting him twenty or twenty-five thousand a year, a wife, a baby son, owned his home in a Spokane suburb, and usually got away to play golf after four in the afternoon during the season...

Here's what had happened to him. Going to lunch he passed an office-building that was being put up – just the skeleton. A beam or something fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk alongside him. It brushed pretty close to him, but didn't touch him, though a piece of the sidewalk was chipped off and flew up and hit his cheek. It only took a piece of skin off, but he still had the scar when I saw him. He rubbed it with his finger – well, affectionately – when he told me about it... He felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works...

'The life he knew was a clean orderly sane responsible affair. Now a falling beam had shown him that life was fundamentally none of these things. He, the good citizen-husband-father, could be wiped out between office and restaurant by the accident of a falling beam...

'What disturbed him was the discovery that in sensibly ordering his affairs he had got out of step, and not into step, with life. He said he knew before he had gone twenty feet from the fallen beam that he would never know peace again until he had adjusted himself to this new glimpse of life.

So Flitcraft just ups and aways, eventually drifting back to nearly his old town and nearly his old life.

‘I don’t think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that’s the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling.’

Today, we’re still adjusting ourselves to beams falling. But then what?

Frankie, Cupola. No Ford

We have a choice of what we choose to normalise. But, as many people have pointed out, the world before Covid-19 was no more ‘normal’ – and certainly no more acceptable in any moral sense – than the one we’re in now. ‘There is no normal for us to go back to,’ wrote **Frankie Boyle**: ‘People sleeping in the streets wasn’t normal; children living in poverty wasn’t normal; neither was our taxes helping to bomb the people of Yemen. Using other people’s lives to pile up objects wasn’t normal, the whole thing was absurd. Governments are currently busy pouring money into propping up existing inequalities, and bailing out businesses that have made their shareholders rich. The world’s worst people think that everybody is going to come out of this in a few months and go willingly back into a kind of numbing servitude. Surely it’s time to start imagining something better.’

The worry is that the world’s worst people may well be right – and likely will be, unless alternatives are posed and seized on. But by whom and how?

Jarring dislocation, of course, is no new thing – many live with much worse than we’re experiencing now as their ‘normal’: from napalming Vietnam’s children to the laser-guided bombing of the Yemen’s. But these, for most people in western society, most of the time, are things that happen to other people. Others, at least, and barely people at that.

That division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is becoming more unstable – hence the increasing viciousness with which it is being defended. Philosopher **Slavoj Zizek** described the 2015 Paris terror attacks as ‘momentary reminders of the violent world outside of our Cupola, a world which, for us, insiders, appears mostly on TV and online reports about distant violent countries, not as part of our reality. That’s why it is our duty to become fully aware of the brutal violence that pervades outside our cupola.’

At the time, I remember thinking what a strong image this was: within the cupola being those enjoying the relative stability of the capitalist epicentres; those outside, not so lucky. A bit like the Jim Carey film *The Truman Show*, where inside the dome is a strange unreality sustained by outside. Our cupola has always been permeable: migrant workers, refugees giving us a glimpse of what’s outside. Most of the time we ignore it. But now it’s more than permeable, it’s caving in. The temptation for those of us under the dome is to try and stop this – to make ever more desperate attempts to shore it up. That’s as true for the left as it is the right: ‘humanitarian’ immigration controls, fair trade, aid programmes.

But the cupola is falling. This isn't one beam, the whole building is collapsing. What is far less clear is what will replace it. As Peter C Baker, writing in the *Guardian*, warned, 'crises can also send societies down darker paths. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, government surveillance of citizens exploded, while George W Bush launched new wars that stretched into indefinite occupations.' The article presents a sobering list of how the current crisis is being used to extend surveillance and strengthen authoritarian leaders.

A poem by Bertolt Brecht puts a similar metaphor to Zizek's cupola into the mouth of the Buddha:

'Lately I saw a house. It was burning. The flame
 Licked at its roof. I went up close and observed
 That there were people still inside. I entered the doorway and called
 Out to them that the roof was ablaze, so exhorting them
 To leave at once. But those people
 Seemed in no hurry. One of them,
 While the heat was already scorching his eyebrows,
 Asked me what it was like outside, whether there was
 Another house for them, and more of this kind. Without answering
 I went out again. These people here, I thought,
 Must burn to death before they stop asking questions.
 And truly friends,
 Whoever does not yet feel such heat in the floor that he'll gladly
 Exchange it for any other, rather than stay, to that man
 I have nothing to say.' So Gautama the Buddha.

It's a wonderful poem, but only a partial truth: we can't let these people burn, not out of our common humanity, but because we're locked in the house with them and, if we're going to avoid winding up as ash, we have to convince them to help us batter down the door. But, as Zizek says, quoting Frederick Jameson, who's apparently quoting someone else, it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Crises, however, have a way of making the unimaginable imaginable. For a time, at least. The disintegration of the cupola isn't simply a negative, it carries a positive aspect. Baker notes:

Disasters and emergencies do not just throw light on the world as it is. They also rip open the fabric of normality. Through the hole that opens up, we glimpse possibilities of other worlds.

Somebody has taken the lid off life and let us look at the works.

Baker gives the examples of how this crisis has exposed the lie of market efficiency, as governments and regulators scramble to socialise capitalists' losses.

But this also happened little more than a decade ago, and we still re-embraced the free market myth as soon as the dust had settled. That we can ill afford to do so again doesn't mean we won't. We have dreadful form on this.

Covid-19 is our current falling beam. Like Flitcraft, it will leave us stunned, with a scarred cheek. Do we, like Flitcraft, go back to business as usual? What stops us?

We have to imagine our way out of this. And these imaginings have to connect with the reality we're in, guiding us to the exit, like breadcrumbs through a forest.

Don't start from here

It's not just society – that broadest 'we' – that has its view of human potential restricted to the limits of capital. It's those consciously looking for radical alternatives. Anti-capitalists – socialists, communists, anarchists – are just as much subject to the PTSD of Covid-19, and no less caught within the gravitational pull of established ways of doing things (with apologies for the horrible mixed metaphor). Those looking to transcend capitalism all too often have their horizons limited by it.

Here I agree with Neil Faulkner's article *A Crisis of Revolutionary Organisation*, that 'anti-globalisation, anti-war, and anti-austerity upsurges have not halted the steady decline of the revolutionary left. There has to be something wrong with the organisational model'. Referring to the revolutionary left from the 1960s on, he writes: 'None became mass organisations – partly, I think, because so many of them adopted a false "democratic centralist" model of organisation.'

Well, yes. And no. There's an inference here that if only the radical left was larger and more democratic, then it would be more viable. 'Even a "small mass party" can make a difference,' writes Neil, referencing the old SWP and Militant. Agreed. But is 'a difference' what we need? Neither the SWP in the 1970s nor Militant in the 1980s got within light years of effecting any kind of social transformation. I'd love to believe we had some kind of second best option – denied socialism, but bought off with a half-decent welfare state, like our grandparents. But given where we are, it's shit or bust.

While many of us have been shaped by these organisations, the radical left is not a good starting point for analysis. It's like the old joke where a foreign tourist in the middle of nowhere stops to ask a farmer for directions. 'Where are you going?' asks the farmer. The tourist tells him and the farmer scratches his head. 'Oh, in that case I wouldn't start from here if I were you...' And so it is with the problem of socialism. If we want to get there, I wouldn't be starting from the myriad groups of the radical left. It leaves us trying to invent the car by grafting a petrol tank and wheels onto a horse.

The way a problem is formulated can itself be part of the problem. If you start from lack of democracy within the left as being the problem, then this is a good solution. But what if that lack is an aspect of a more profound malaise? The issue

is not what needs to happen with the radical left, but what needs to happen (and what is happening) with the working class, and the world in which it is both product and producer.

‘The central issue is democracy,’ writes Neil: ‘The ruling class hates democracy like death. The working class, on the other hand, tends to create organs of participatory democracy whenever it engages in mass struggle; and the higher the level of struggle, the more layers of the class that are drawn into battle, the higher the level of democracy tends to be.’

While I agree with Neil’s second sentence, the central issue is not democracy – although democracy is bound up with it, and pretty much for the reasons Neil identifies. Democratisation is a necessary but not sufficient condition of the creation of the regeneration of the workers’ movement. That’s as true for the unions and other working class bodies as it is for socialist organisations. But it is not in itself a remedy that can fix something that is more profoundly broken.

Imagine, if you will, that the SWP or Militant had been more democratic back in the day when a black and white TV licence was the default option. Would it have made a difference? Yes, I think it probably would have. Would it have got us to where we need to go – socialism, post capitalism, whatever? Unlikely. The reason why is that it doesn’t address the divorce of the radical left from the experience of most working people. People don’t choose not to follow the SWP because it’s undemocratic. They don’t follow it for the same reason they don’t buy a bulk order of raffia-work tea pots – they see no use for it.

Meditations on mediations

‘Organisation is the mediation between theory and practice,’ writes Neil: ‘Radical ideas have to be carried by thousands of activists if they are to influence mass forces. Upsurges of struggle are blind and burn themselves out without rising mass consciousness. That is why revolutionaries – always and everywhere – have an obligation to attempt to build organisation.’

‘Organisation is the mediation between theory and practice’: a quote from Georg Lukacs (who’s riffing on Hegel). Which begs the question: what sort of organisation? Organisation changes with the tasks it sets itself, and the material conditions within which those tasks are to be realised. Effective working class organisation is a function of the way in which the conditions of life are reproduced, born of it and reacting to it.

All organisations... fit into the general social structure. They have no absolute ‘independence’; in one way or another all are determined by society and help determine society in turn. None of the organisations in capitalism can consistently be anti-capitalistic. ‘Consistency’ refers merely to a limited ideological activity and is the privilege of sects and individuals.

Paul Mattick, *Spontaneity and Organisation*

Recognising this is one thing. Escaping from it another. Forms of organisation appropriate for a static, relatively homogenous industrial workforce are not going to be the same for a transient and service-dominated one. That's likely as true for a socialist organisation as a trade union. And yet the radical left's organisational model looks pretty much the same as it did half a century ago. At the very least, surely that should raise questions.

Is this mediation a neutral one, like the pipes in a sewer? Is it static – the same mediation irrespective of the theory, practice or the conditions these take place in? If the answer to this is 'no', then why does the left keep defaulting to essentially the same structures, time after time, decade after decade – especially when that organisational blueprint has so evidently failed?

The efficacy of the left cannot be judged in separation from the broader working class, or indeed from how society reproduces itself. This always takes organisational form and this generally reflects the division of labour that dominates this society – particularly between mental and physical labour, which is manifest as the division between the leaders/thinkers and the rank and file/doers. It is one way in which organisations attempting to transcend capitalism are structurally trapped within it.

Marx, I believe, had this one nailed 175 years ago, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.

This division is particularly apparent in the left: the leadership churning out the theory, with the rank and file flogging their thoughts in printed form on demos or outside of the local Sainsburys on a Saturday morning. But how do you keep a rank and file happy (or at least occupied) selling newspapers in the time of social media? The old left ran out of road. And not before time.

This focus on leadership is particularly apparent in Leon Trotsky's Transitional Programme, which states:

The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.

People follow bad ideas, propounded by bad leaders. The remedy is to advance good ideas, propounded by good leaders. There is no organic relationship between leaders and led. Hence the primacy of those 'transmit' organs of newspapers, website – and the people whose job it is to shift them. I think – you do.

Another word for this ossified approach to leadership is ‘managerialism’. It stifles innovation – not deliberately, but because control of the narrative by a few restricts alternatives to that narrative. Even if you’re right for a time, you’ll be wrong eventually – we all are. And when you’re wrong, it’ll likely be significant. Having as open a structure as possible increases the correctives. This isn’t a new or radical idea: the [wisdom of crowds](#) goes back as far as Aristotle.

Down with common sense

I mentioned above that organisation expresses the division of labour within society. This division is itself part and parcel of the alienation that characterises capitalism. Marx saw alienation as playing a role that extends beyond the labour process to the legitimisation of the entire social structure of capitalist society:

The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas.

The German Ideology MECW Vol 5 p59

You can’t therefore overturn those ideas without engaging with the material relations that underpin them. The leader/led model of the radical left, and its focus on transmitting, ducks that very issue, instead simply reflecting this alienation. It’s insidious because it’s the naturalised way of doing things – the common sense of capitalist society.

This inability to challenge that common sense results in the credibility gap experienced by socialists: even modest proposals such as more progressive taxation are rejected as unrealistic by large swathes of people. Anyone who canvassed for the Labour Party in the last election would have got this in spades: people dismissing policies such as grant funded higher education and increased NHS spending as unattainable – and in general these were people who were of an age to be beneficiaries of similar policies a few years earlier.

Compare this to the roll out of the welfare state following the Second World War. A Labour government was elected to enact this, and received enormous backing by a working class that had no experience of its benefits (though had certainly felt its lack), because such a thing had never existed.

Why the contrast? Common sense would suggest that the situation should be the reverse: people would be more likely to support something they had experienced the benefits of, rather than put their efforts into a promise or an aspiration of which they had no empirical proof of its practicality.

One difference is working class organisation: the embodiment of class consciousness. The post-45 generation had mass trade unions, parties and campaigns that had made these aspirations a material force in society. They were credible to millions of working class people, because they had been involved in

a collective struggle to make them real – had debated, organised and fought for these goals. Whereas, although Labour in 2019 was Europe’s largest party, it was so in a virtual vacuum, with trade union membership flatlining and industrial action at historic lows.

In this environment, Labour’s rather modest proposals just seemed like a ‘wouldn’t it be nice if...’ arbitrary wish-list. This is because it had no connection with working class aspirations as a material force – not because people don’t want or need these things, but because they are not organised to achieve them. Without that organisation, they really do seem unachievable.

In such circumstances, the common sense of capitalist society prevails, from the household economics of austerity to immigrants taking ‘our stuff’. Challenging this isn’t simply a matter of putting forward different ideas – though that’s important – but giving those ideas a materiality in working class life. And that is exactly where the left has been wanting for decades, instead hoping that broadcasting ideas – be it in Labour’s manifesto or on a website – will lead them to settle on fertile ground and proliferate.

It hasn’t happened and it is unlikely to, because that’s simply not how ideas take hold. There has been little thought given to the interplay between how contemporary capitalist social relations are reproduced, their impact on class and organisation and ideology.

This approach is naively idealist, in the belief that a notion will be picked up irrespective of the real conditions; it’s patronising to the mass of people, in the sense that they simply have all these wrong beliefs that can be transformed by giving them an alternative; and intellectually lazy, in refusing to interrogate what those conditions are and their implications for socialist strategy.

The central issue is how the working class develops, learns and becomes more conscious of its position and potential. It’s in this sense – not just the absence of democracy – that the radical left is inadequate to the task it set itself, and why I think it’s not the best departure point for a discussion on what a viable working-class movement should be, and how it can be built.

In other words, it’s insufficient to put better politics into those organisational ‘vessels’, which are a neutral part of this – or at least a very secondary problem. Neither is it a matter of these hitting some kind of critical mass. I think that’s wrong – you have to chuck the baby out with the bathwater. The British radical left is a failed tradition. We cannot afford to be nostalgic over it. We can learn from it – there’s a Japanese saying that goes, ‘even if you just sit on a rock for seven years, you’ll learn *something*’ – but we shouldn’t look to fix it.

Spontaneity: squaring circles and bridging gaps

Is this an argument for spontaneity – back off, lefties, the working class will sort itself out? Well, that all depends on what you mean by ‘spontaneity’.

Let's pick apart the problem. The fundamental contradictions of capitalist society necessitate a human agency to transcend them. But that necessity doesn't mean that such an agency is inevitable. An acorn must, of necessity, grow into an oak tree. It's what it's *for*. That doesn't stop most from being eaten by pigs (if *Winnie the Pooh* is an accurate description of the ecosystem of Hundred Acre Wood that we can generalise from).

Far from anyone being spontaneously class conscious because they work for a wage, the form of the wage relation itself – free exchange – conceals workers' subjugation. Workers are the active producers of capitalist society, but are constrained from seeing this because of their alienation from its product – an alienation that is itself the product of their own activity. That activity, however, has a dual nature: collective and creative, while producing this obfuscation.

Look at it in the context of the pandemic: you work in a chain restaurant chain. The chain shuts down. As an individual, what can you do but accept it, and consider yourself bloody lucky if you're furloughed? That's a realistic perspective. If your workplace is organised, you can talk to your workmates and the union to see what backing you can get to defend your jobs. If the sort of class organisation you belong to goes across industrial boundaries, you can start to look at how workers might be able to do this on a wider level. That starts to raise questions about who runs things, and to what end: do you exist to make money for your boss, or can you have wider ambitions? But without organisation, those ambitions are fantasy, and will be dismissed as such.

And here comes my beef with most of the left. The paragraph above is sketchy at best, and quite possibly wrong. Why? Because I don't work in a chain restaurant, and I'm not working politically with anyone that does. I don't know the conditions. Neither do most leftists blithely issuing demands. They're teaching people to swim without ever having got their feet wet. But they read a book about swimming. Or maybe they're pretty nifty on a pedalo. It's like believing you're handy in a fight because you were top notch at *Street Fighter* in your teens. Good luck with that.

Because of the fragmentation of labour by capital, most workers will be only partially aware of their situation, and not organised to the degree necessary to give this understanding a material expression. I know my boss is a shit, but what can I do? The situation of the left is a facet of this. When this awareness has not resulted in viable strategies and organisations, anti-capitalists will remain marginalised and fragmented. And marginalised and fragmented the British left is. Which is remarkable when you think that a few short months ago, we were (supposedly) at the helm of the largest party in Europe. Not so remarkable, when you relate this to an understanding that capturing an organisation is rather different from that organisation having a living reality within the class it purports to represent – even when it's got more than half a million members. That needs a material presence in workplaces and communities. While there were examples

of this within the Labour Party, they existed at the margins and didn't characterise the party, which was overwhelmingly passive.

Marx argued that from the working class 'emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness, which may, of course, arise among the other classes too through the contemplation of the situation of this class' (*The German ideology*, MECW Vol 5 p52). 'Contemplation', however, is not the root of this consciousness, but workers' mass activity. Yes, it must be theorised, but such theory must go beyond its own frontiers into the realm of what the first Thesis on Feuerbach calls 'practical-critical' activity.

In contrast, the 'Marxist' Second International came to see the working class as being dependent on a theory that was *independent* of it, as argued by Lucio Colletti in his critique of the Second International economist, Rudolph Hilferding, who:

allows no room for a link between *science* and *class consciousness* ... Socio-economic development is seen as a process unfolding before the observer and the scientist like the movement of the stars. 'Economic laws' are objective laws, external to classes and independent of our wills just like the laws of nature.

Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin* p230

The Marxist 'orthodoxy' of the Second International erased Marx's concept of proletarian emancipation. The working class's potential for conscious action became subsumed by immutable social and economic laws. 'Orthodox' Marxists such as Hilferding could retain a formal commitment to revolution without it affecting their practice, as revolution was perceived as a purely objective law-driven process, much the same as Newton's laws of motion. Marxism was reduced to a set of 'scientific' predictions on the one hand, and an unrelated series of ethical beliefs on the other – a sort of secular Calvinism.

One striking thing about this is how similar it is to theorisations of spontaneity, although the movements embodied by each perspective – social democracy and syndicalism – are hostile to one another. Paul Mattick highlights this in a thought provoking article from 1949:

By stressing spontaneity, labour organisations admitted their own weakness. Since they did not know how to change society, they indulged in the hope that the future would solve the problem... Spontaneity had to lend 'reality' to their apparently hopeless tasks, to excuse an enforced inactivity and justify consistency.

Marx saw human action, not external 'laws' as central to change, and any social laws as a result of this historically specific activity:

History does nothing, it possesses no immense wealth, it wages no battles. It is man, real living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; history is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.

The Holy Family MECW Vol 4 p93

Economic development can only provide the working class with the possibility of changing society. That change can only be realised if the working class consciously grasps it, acting as a *free, self-determined agent*. That's not a gift that can be given, but a learned experience.

The notion that class consciousness has to be introduced from the working class for outside is not only wrong, but illogical. The revolutionary agency within capitalist society only becomes such when raised to be so by a section of society that isn't a revolutionary agency? It takes a special kind of thought process to square that circle. Class consciousness always takes organisational form. And no one organises 'spontaneously' – it takes thought and effort, and is an all-round pain in the arse. Such organisation must be appropriate to the social and historical conditions, be they unions, workers' councils, parties or whatever. The spontaneous development of the working class – in the sense of an absence of organisational expression of its own struggles – is not possible.

The manner of the reproduction of labour conditions the forms of working class organisation. The problem is that such a relationship is at best inadequately theorised. It's exactly the same problem for the anti-capitalist left – the development of a theoretically guided practice adequate to and reflective of the situation. Those forms of organisation, able to both structure, and be structured by, the development of working class struggle, are not a given. So returning, Ronnie Corbett fashion, to an earlier point, while democracy facilitates this development, the problem is bigger.

To begin at the beginning: under-milk Leninism

How do we formulate an approach to organisation that doesn't fall into either spontaneity or some *deus ex machina* 'solution'? We need a fundamental reconsideration. We have to go back to go forward. Zizek expresses this nicely in his commentary on Lenin's view of the move from War Communism to the New Economic Policy:

His conclusion—to begin from the beginning—makes it clear that he is not talking about merely slowing down and fortifying what has already been achieved, but about descending back to the starting point: one should begin from the beginning, not from the place that one succeeded in reaching in the previous effort.

If you want to get somewhere, though you're not sure where that is, it can be helpful to cross off those routes you know are wrong. The radical left exemplifies such a wrong route: not because it's democratic centralist, and not just because it's demonstrably failed, but because its approach is fundamentally flawed: it's wrong because, *logically, it cannot be right*. It is a 'solution' formulated and sustained without reference to the problem it seeks to solve.

Another limitation of this model is the importance it attaches to the growth of its own organisation. Which is primary: do you effect change because you've been successful in growing; or do you grow because you have contributed to meaningful change, and people see the value of what you do? The distinction is important.

The former has been the approach of the radical left: the central objective is to grow your organisation, because that's how you effect change. After all, if your model for change is the vanguard party, and what you're doing is building it in embryo, that's what's most important. It becomes the imperative. It's the radical modern day equivalent of that granddaddy of reformism Eduard Bernstein's statement that the movement is everything, the end goal nothing. Except, in Bernstein's defence, he was talking about a truly vast movement of a mass party, trade unions, educational bodies, community organisations – and probably the odd temperance society. We've got a little less in the bank.

But the end goal *is* everything – especially given the existential risks of not getting there. The organisational forms by which we get there will be fluid, ephemeral and no doubt festooned with false starts and screw ups. Let's not give any organisational incarnation determinacy in terms of judging success or failure. We need to benchmark progress, but a core metric shouldn't be how big our organisation is. Indeed, prioritisation of a particular organisational form can pose a barrier to learning from the actual movement taking place around us.

If the crisis we face isn't so much getting socialist ideas into the broad mass of society, but of building viable emancipatory solutions out of it, then that presents an entirely different problem, necessitating very different approaches.

So what?

Let me try and pull together some elements of an alternative approach. Some notions:

There is no chance that we can go back: economically, environmentally or socially. Heraclitus' flowing river, of which it's not possible to step into twice, is now a raging torrent tearing at its banks. But Flitcraft didn't want to go back, either. The yearning for normalcy – to be left to get on with our lives – is very strong. And there are forces pushing at the majority of society – those whose ethnicity, gender, sexual preference or whatever give them a pass to the fruits of such 'normalcy' – to enact a pantomime of it. We will crouch in the rubble of the cupola and be told we are safe, taking comfort that there are others that don't even have the luxury of huddling for shelter amid debris. We will feel privileged,

defend our piles of rocks from those who lack even this, even more fiercely than we fought to keep them out of the intact dome.

This danger is strengthened by the fact that people's social being clearly isn't conditioning consciousness in a simple, unmediated sense. Consciousness is an active part of how that being is constituted, and one in an alienated form that is actively manipulated and determined by the most reactionary forces: Noam Chomsky's *manufactured consent* evolving into the manufactured revolt of those waving placards, backed by guns, shouting 'social distancing = communism' (ah, if only). Nativism – taking the form of Brexit in the UK – has become the dominant politics throughout much of the world.

An actively constituted consciousness is needed as an alternative. This can only be one that has its material grounding in the working class. That won't be furthered by yet another left group broadcasting its views, but by a self-conscious organisation and articulation of those interests: by the class actively creating itself.

The development of organisations that can be an adequate expression of this must be rooted in a radical uncertainty: we do not and cannot know how this crisis unfolds, but we can help it unfold in the way with the greatest potential. It is better to be roughly right than precisely wrong, as John Maynard Keynes said. We need fluid and, as Neil Faulkner says, profoundly democratic organisations to test and hone these initial rough guesses at what is right. But, by virtue of this, we do know what such organisation *cannot* be: it can't be a form of politics that operates as if we do know – the vanguard addresses the masses.

Over the past decade, a resurgent left – from Corbynism in the UK to others such as Syriza and Sanders – has put the idea of socialism back on the agenda. But this incarnation of socialism has likely reached its high water mark. We need to understand and overcome the limitations of these movements. Some things we do know. Internationalism is crucial, not just ethically, but to understand and transcend capitalism. We have yet to root anti-capitalism firmly within anti-imperialism: an understanding of how capitalism is constituted as a global structure of exploitation and oppression, and how this manifests itself through nationalism and racism at the national level. The lack of an internationalist left to clearly challenge this and to organise around it underpinned the failure to provide a convincing working-class response to Brexit.

The departure point for a viable reconstitution of the left isn't, therefore, a reorientation of existing groups around a check-list of 'correct' policies, but an enquiry into the most viable forms of working-class organisation in the conditions faced today. Only the working class learning its own power through its own experience will lead to radical change.

A plague on both your houses

All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The Communist Manifesto

All that is solid melts into air – like a fist when you open your hand. We have a duty to use those sober senses to determine what the real conditions of life are, not to seek solace in broken formulations.

The plague the protagonists of *The Decameron* sheltered from put into motion forces that brought about feudalism's eventual collapse. Paul Mason develops this theme in an [interesting fashion](#) here, pondering on whether Covid-19 is to capitalism what the Black Death was to feudalism. Is this a viable comparison? It's rather too early to say. But one thing is certain – we don't have the luxury of centuries of erosion that lay between the Black Death and the death of feudalism. A toxic brew of climate change and accompanying pandemics wrought from industrial agriculture and environmental destruction, turning bats into plague creators, poses existential threats within a decade.

To return to WB Yeats, in *The Second Coming*:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

That resonates today, a century from its publication. The centre cannot hold – indeed has not held. Yet, centre politics – the Guardian, Starmer, etc – desperately try and patch it together, amid this rising blood-dimmed tide. But it isn't sufficient to point out the hopelessness of that endeavour.

At this time of pandemic and crisis, the working class needs to send out the message – a plague on both your houses: neither the alt right nor a return to liberal capitalism. In order to do that, we need a socialist politics germinated from the soil of today, not one rooted in nostalgia.