

COMMON SENSE

Journal Of Edinburgh Conference Of Socialist Economists



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Journal Of Edinburgh Conference Of Socialist Economists

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Editorial

Common Sense was first produced in Edinburgh in 1987. It offered a direct challenge to the theory production machines of specialised academic journals, and tried to move the articulation of intellectual work beyond the collapsing discipline of the universities. It was organised according to a minimalist production and editorial process which received contributions that could be photocopied and stapled together. It was reproduced in small numbers, distributed to friends, and sold at cost price in local bookshops and in a few outposts throughout the world. It maintained three interrelated commitments: to provide an open space wherein discussion could take place without regard to style or to the rigid classification of material into predefined subject areas; to articulate critical positions within the contemporary political climate; and to animate the hidden Scottish passion for general ideas. Within the context of the time, the formative impetus of Common Sense was a desire to juxtapose disparate work and to provide a continuously open space for a general critique of the societies in which we live.

For the first nine issues, the pages of Common Sense were filled with various attempts to address the issues of the day and with items that did not seek to be classified as one thing or another. Space was offered to ranters, to poets, to philosophers, to theorists, to musicians, to cartoonists, to artists, to students and teachers, to writers, and to whosoever could produce work that could be photocopied. However, times have now changed and the minimalist attitude to production has proved to be somewhat restrictive. Consequently, Common Sense has expanded to the form you see before you here. Nevertheless, the basic commitments of the journal remain as they were at its inauguration - to pose the continuous question of what the common sense of our age is, to articulate critical positions in the present, and to offer a space for those who have produced work that they feel should be disseminated but that would never be sanctioned by the dubious forces of the intellectual police.

Common Sense has not however been confined to the pages of a journal, and its various editors and contributors have done much more than produce words. All have experienced the massive changes that have characterised living in Scotland during the late 1980s, and all have been involved in one form or another with struggles against the creeping

attempts of the British State to control and socialise its population into the so called "Thatcherite" management plan. In January 1989, *Common Sense* helped to organise a conference on the poll tax that deliberately refused to be drawn into party political or factionalised bickering, and that attempted to theorise the thing beyond the simplistic conventional wisdom of the "its unfair" argument. From this developed an increased awareness of the politics of debt enforcement in relation to the crisis of late twentieth century capitalism, and a realisation that resistance to the poll tax involves much more than criticism of the party of government and must also involve resistance to government and state. Questions were raised thereby in relation to the adequacy of traditional political theory and practice, to the status of the law, and to the supposed benefits of the capitalist social democratic state.

The experience of this conference fed into the pages of the journal as discussions about the relevance of Marx(ism) to the imposition of the poll tax, and it suffused the independent anti poll tax groups who were increasingly discovering that the enemy was not only the Westminster parliament but also - and more crucially - the Labour Party controlled local councils with their bully boys - Scotland's very own unofficial riot police - the Militant Tendency. *Common Sense* moved with the common sense of the general revolt against the poll tax, and into the experience of autonomous resistance - frequently in direct opposition to Parties that offer themselves as representatives of the common cause. *Common Sense* has thus developed connections between radical philosophy, the critical or open tradition of Marx(ism), anarchism, innovative theory, autonomous activity, alternative forms of education, and good old-fashioned common sense.

The newly formed *Common Sense* now finds itself in a highly volatile and transitional period of historical movement. The Labour Party Mafia is preparing itself to continue where the Tories left off, and the Scottish National Party believes that the Westminster Parliament has just voted the poll tax out of existence. Meanwhile, under instruction from local government toadies, sheriff officers continue in their efforts to recuperate poll tax arrears as community resistance does its best to protect people. Local government generally is in a state of financial chaos, and the legitimacy of the British legal and justice systems daily becomes more obviously absurd. Moreover, in the aftermath of the so called Gulf War and with the breaking down of the boundary between East and West, masses of people seek work as capital attempts to produce larger more mobile markets, to assert itself in new areas of control, and to pay off its debts. The struggles within these movements will no doubt form the basis of the next century and set the terms of the

common sense of tomorrow. The conditions of critical debate have already changed as new political positions become articulated within the demise of those nebulous entities that usually went by the names of Monetarism and The Cold War....

* * * * *

In this changing context, Common Sense is a form of words that needs to be clarified somewhat. It could easily signify anything from the conventional wisdom of the dying enterprise culture, to the pragmatic street wisdom of the many who have been excluded by its beneficiaries and who are thereby forced to struggle for basic human dignity. According to the Scottish Philosophical tradition, common sense has two major meanings: the psychological sixth sense that unites and distinguishes the perceptions of the other five; and the *sensus communis* or public sense that negotiates a shared sense of who and where we are, that maintains a sensible critique of the political world, and that animates the general feelings of a society. Common Sense thus recalls the notion of the Democratic Intellect according to which ideas are freely and generally available to all, and it resonates with a literary style of philosophical generalism that is utterly different from the dominant Anglo-Saxon and analytic traditions to which we have now become too accustomed in the educational institutions of the twentieth century, but which remains a powerful force at the margins of educational life and in the movements of Scottish culture more generally.

The producers of Common Sense remain committed to the journal's original brief - to offer a venue for open discussion and to juxtapose written work without regard to style and without deferring to the restrictions of university based journals, and they hope to be able to articulate something of the common sense of the new age before us. Common Sense does not have any political programme nor does it wish to define what is political in advance. Nevertheless, we are keen to examine what is this thing called "common sense", and we hope that you who read the journal will also make contributions whenever you feel the inclination. We feel that there is a certain imperative to think through the changes before us and to articulate new strategies before the issues that arise are hijacked by the Universities to be theorised into obscurity, or by Party machines to be practiced to death.

The producers of Common Sense will consider contributions from anywhere by anyone on any issue and in any form that can without difficulty be included in our new format - we are prepared to publish anything from recipes to meditations on truth. We will accept copy as

typescript, camera ready artwork, photographs, and computer files (Apple or IBM stored on 3.5 inch floppies). We would like the journal to be as full as possible of disparate work, and we would like to keep contributions as short and up to the minute as possible. We would prefer that articles be no longer than 5000 words or so, although we will consider everything we receive and will begin to publish longer pieces as occasional pamphlets loosely organised according to themes or particular debates. In this turbulent world, it would be politically naive to uncritically publish everything we receive, but at the same time we have no access to hard and fast criteria of exclusion. These issues are themselves subject to vigorous debate amongst the producers of *Common Sense*. It is for you as potential contributors to judge on the basis of critical common sense what should be included in the pages before you now.

A New World Order or Old World Chaos?

“Bush is Saddam’s friend. Why did he stop?”

“When they came they started to kill all the Kurdish and Turkish people. Just shoot, shoot, shoot by the government. The United States caused all this, why, why, why?”

Kurdish refugees fleeing from the Iraqi army

A New World Order?

In recent months, much ink has been spilt in describing and discussing the New World Order. For supporters and critics of Bush’s expedition in the desert, it is rapidly becoming *a new Common Sense*. As people interested in *an alternative common sense* to the ones we are cajoled to accept, we find this notion laughable. The New World Order is not much of an order, neither is it very new. On closer inspection it reveals itself as an Old World Chaos.

It was President Carter who declared that any attack on the Gulf would be treated as an attack on the vital interests of the United States. As part of an oil-based world economy, the United States has been the world’s largest energy consumer for the last twenty years. Carter’s creation of a rapid deployment force, ready to intervene in the Gulf area to protect the oilfields, was no accident. Since 1945, the United States has slipped from controlling the world economic system, through the Bretton Woods agreement, to being forced to share control with Europe (led by Germany) and Japan. Since 1982 the U.S. has become the world’s biggest debtor.

In the space of twenty four hours - from August 1st - 2nd last year, the Iraqi regime moved from being a ‘Middle East ally’, to being the ‘Arabic Third Reich’. The Western powers view of the Iraqi state is now very similar to what it was on August 1st. It is seen as being the lesser

of two evils - the alternative being self-determination for the people who live in the region. At the same time, we find that the Kuwaiti people, on whose behalf the UN US forces claimed to be fighting, are being redefined - the ruling Al-Sabah family has decreed that one million people are to be made stateless. Just as Kuwaitis suffered brutal repression after August 2nd, so are the Palestinians, other 'collaborators' and members of the political opposition now being tortured and killed.

George Bush is an old hand in the art of de-stabilisation, ever since he was appointed CIA chief in 1975 - at the time the US was supporting the genocide of 200,000 people in East Timor. As we go to press, we find ourselves forced to watch the obscene spectacle of a regime with Imperialist pretensions, Iraq, attempting to continue a genocidal programme, against the Kurds and others, that was interrupted when it got on the wrong side of a larger Imperial power, the United States

So how do we explain this paradox? One of the slogans of the Anti War campaigns was "No Blood for Oil". While much blood has been spilt, has Bush really secured the supply of oil that Carter was so keen to protect? On the one hand income from US controlled oil fields is secure and has increased in price, on the other hand Kuwait's oil is in flames. We prefer to ask why it is that so much blood has been spilt - what is really happening to people who have no choice but to leave their own homes to avoid starvation and to find work? There is no easy answer. Certainly, the issue of the war was not simply about oil. Let us look at the themes of debt, oil revenue, global money and migrant labour.

Debt

The control of populations, especially migrant workers, in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq, permits the US to finance its debt. This debt was built up during the credit-sustained boom of the 1980s. This boom has taken an ever more speculative dimension as illustrated by the crash of 1987 and the recession of the early 1990s. It has become clear that the financing of this boom was fictitious - it was based, like any loan, on the promise of work to be carried out tomorrow.

The struggle of the working class has made it impossible for capital to use money as an effective means of command over workers. Instead, credit is used as a means of preventing capital insolvency. Credit is supplied to service interest payment. The ballooning of debt involves the accumulation of a growing claim on profits yet to be produced by the workers. The crash of 87 and subsequent recession brings to the fore the

fictitious character of exploiting labour on the basis of an accumulation of debt.

Oil Revenue

The US is able to finance its deficits as long as there is an inflow of money capital. High interest rates are one means of achieving this. However, high interest rates undermine the US balance of trade, so eroding the value of the dollar on whose stability the entire deficit financing of world demand depends. There is also an inflow of money to the US from debtor countries. In addition, there is the inflow of dollars earned by OPEC, especially Saudi Arabia. Oil revenues finance, to a great extent, the global deficit spending of demand. *The depositing of oil profits in American banks depends on the political stability in the region.*

The war involved the attempt to secure the flow of not simply oil, but of oil revenue into the US. Despotism regimes like Saudi Arabia hold their reserves in dollars in exchange for American political and military protection.

The Global Flow of Money

By invading Kuwait, Iraq upset the security arrangements of the area. Iraq invaded Kuwait because it needed money - money to rebuild after the long war with Iran, and to maintain its army - so as to suppress internal resistance to rule by the Ba'athist party. Prior to the invasion Iraq had threatened force to end the Kuwaiti practice of producing and selling more crude oil than their OPEC quota allowed. This practice tended to lower oil prices, so reducing Iraqi income from its own oil exports. Why did the US go to war? The US went to war against one of its allies in order to reassert its influence over the distribution of oil revenue and, most importantly, over the global flow of money from the South to the North. The rest of world capitalism depends on this influence. This control is fundamental to the stability of world capitalism, and depends on the ruthless exploitation of labour power in the region, especially that of migrant workers.

The Threat of Migrant Labour

Iraq's violation of the status quo involved the real possibility of

undermining a power structure upon whose preservation the rest of world capitalism depends. The success of Kuwait's ruling family in outlawing legal opposition and the success of the Saudi Arabian ruling family in undermining any criticism of their rule have been vital for imposing a ruthless exploitation of labour thereby ensuring the global flow of money from South to North. *The defence of the status quo is heavily dependent on the political control of migrant workers in countries of the Gulf/Middle East area, through poverty, fear and militarisation of the region.*

The reimposition of the status quo has militarised the region and given greater power to the U.S. and its client states to assert control over local and migrant workers, thereby adding to their influence in the region as a whole. This control allows the US to affect oil policy and to guide investment decisions, such as the holding of oil revenues in dollars. The military destruction of oil production in Kuwait and Iraq allows states like Saudi Arabia to assert their influence in the OPEC cartel with much better effect. In addition, the war offered an opportunity to inflict a massive destruction which offers investment opportunities for capital at a time of recession. In November 1990 the largest arms sale in history took place - \$20 billion of U.S. arms to Saudi Arabia, and at present companies are tendering for \$25 billion of reconstruction contracts in Kuwait. However along with these opportunities there are also dangers.

While Israel has taken advantage of the war to legitimise its policy of keeping the occupied territories under curfew, and replace its Palestinian workforce with immigrants from the Soviet Union, Kuwait is trying to use the opportunity to replace its migrant workers (including many Palestinians) from Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Sudan, Egypt, Syrian and Jordan with workers from Eastern Europe.

It is important to remember that George Bush's appeals to the people of Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein were made to the very people his forces had just been carpet-bombing out of existence. Around 200,000 people were eliminated in Operation Desert Storm, many of them Shi'ias from Southern Iraq and Kurds from the North, conscripted by Saddam Hussein. Many commentators who accuse the US of hypocrisy seem to forget this. The US administration is being consistent when it says that the 200,000 war dead and the casualties arising out of subsequent uprising are 'unfortunate'. It is clear from the lack of US support for these uprisings that Bush and other allied states want a leader like Saddam Hussein, but more pliable. A victory by Iraqi Shi'ias, with links to Iran, just at the time when Iran, (along with Syria) is being prepared for International 'acceptability' - i.e. secure

investment - would give a boost to the radical fundamentalist elements of the Iranian regime and threaten further destabilisation of the whole Gulf and Middle East region. Similarly, allowing 1.8 million displaced Iraqi Kurds to settle in refugee camps on the Iranian borders would both lend support to the Iranian opposition - who have relied on the Kurds for shelter since the Khomeni regime began wholesale elimination of any resistance to the government in 1979.

The threats to Turkey are equally serious - for the last few decades, the Turkish government has been pursuing a campaign of torture, killings and cultural 'assimilation' (i.e. elimination) against its Kurdish population. It is now trying to enter the EEC and the last thing it needs is a refugee population, tribally organized and with nothing left to lose, with a tradition of armed resistance against one of the world's most vicious dictators. Nightmares of a Kurdish *intifada* must be haunting the Turkish and Iranian governments, as well as the United States. This is one of the reasons behind the moves being made at present to encourage the Kurds to return home, under some form of military protection. It is becoming plain for all to see that Operation Desert Storm is by no means over, but is instead continuing to throw up new and more dangerous crises for all the states participating in it.

What was the war about?

The war served the purpose of (preemptively) suppressing resistance against an ruthless exploitation of labour in the region.

The war was a military imposition of law and order upon largely migrant workers.

Further, the war was a means of securing the flow of oil revenue, so contributing to the financing of the US deficits. These deficits are, to a great extent, financed and guaranteed by debtor countries and the oil producing countries.

The war was an attempt by the United States and others to stabilise global exchange relations through the guarantee of holding oil earnings in dollars. This guarantee depends on political and military power.

The war was an attempt to guarantee that profit will be extracted from

migrant workers at the point of a gun. *The war against Iraq was not against the Iraqi state but against the working class in the whole area.*

This war was a war which aimed at securing the integration of labour at home on the basis of an accumulation of debt. *The sustaining of debt depends on the military might to combat any collapses in control.* The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was such a collapse in control.

However, the Iraqi invasion was a welcome collapse as it made possible the show of military might. This show illustrates the intensity of the current crisis of capital. War was always a means of safeguarding relations of exploitation and of reimposing political domination through the liquidation of people and mass destruction. *The attempt to resolve the current crisis by war indicates the despair of capital. It indicates its despair because, in order to reimpose its domination, it has to execute mass destruction.*

Disorder

The invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent devastation of both Kuwait and Iraq are not about the rebuilding of order but a reliance on disorder.

Over the last 45 years there have been many 'Low Intensity Conflicts' (to use the Pentagon jargon) around the world, largely US-sponsored and run. This war was the first 'High Intensity Conflict' since Vietnam - an unashamed, overt display of US military might. This event is not part of the New World Order but part of a series of wars, past and present (and future?).

Why did the military move when it did? There is no self-sufficient, all-encompassing answer. We have explored the themes of debt, oil revenue, global money and migrant labour, and mentioned the role of the arms and construction industries as beneficiaries. And so on. One could carry on forever trying to find out some specific reason why - we could doubtless come up with many such reasons.

So what explanations are we left with? One answer to the question might be that such behaviour is the workings of power-crazed meglomaniacs with no regard for human life, in the best traditions of *Doctor Strangelove*. It is true that Bush and Major as well as Hussein are insane and actively trying to exert power and violence. The danger with taking this view is that we assume that Bush, Major, and Hussein had a clear strategy. As people committed to creating *an alternative common sense* we do not want to simply condemn the New World Order

but show why it is an illusion.

What is clear is that *there is a very direct link between states and violence*, which is usually described as the need for defence of the realm. In practice it is the need to repress groups of people, whether they live inside or outside a particular border, and the need to ensure a thriving and profitable military and arms industry, both as a means to this end and as an end in itself. This process is sometimes described as the military-industrial complex.

The war and genocide that is happening as we speak is about increasing the chances for various states, acting on behalf of international capital, to terrorise people into submission so that they will work hard and restore profitability.

Overall then, we are left with disorder. As the slogan "Law is not Order ; Anarchy is not Chaos" implies, *it is they who are in a state of disorder. They also seek disorder, and depend on it to survive.* They seek disorder because we leave them no other choice. Their disorder is a direct result of our resistance to their repression and will continue to be so. Disorder is as much a crisis for them as it is for us. *Our experience of their "New World Order" is more of same old chaos, just as our attempts to take control of our lives throw them into chaos.* That's why it's important to reject the New World Order as well as condemn it. The only weapons they have at their disposal are *disorder and fear*. They use disorder and fear as an attempt to liquidate people who resist, and as an attempt to ensure the continual displacement of workers - to make them employable and with no rights apart from a possible work permit. It is our project to continue resisting, thereby perpetuating the crisis of the regimes involved.

* * *

Many of us here in Scotland are feeling outraged at what is happening yet at the same time wonder what we can do. What remains as a daily reality for us in Scotland as much as people elsewhere on the planet is the violent nature of the state and its attempts to impoverish and eliminate us. That is why struggles that we are involved in directly contribute to the weakening of state power internationally. That is why (for instance) the Anti-Poll Tax Campaign, another example of collective resistance to debt, is a very direct and easy way of doing something that channels our outrage into something creative.

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