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Introducing
David Ridley's
new book:

NO CONSOLATION



RADICAL POLITICS IN
TERRIFYING TIMES

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POST-16 EDUCATOR

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Crisis, consolation and education

David Ridley introduces the ideas in his new book.

You don't have to be a Marxist to realise that the world is a mess.

We've just about survived a global pandemic, which killed anywhere between six and fourteen million people, depending on who you ask, wiped 15 per cent real GDP - ie GDP adjusted for inflation - from the global economy, tossed about 100 million people out of work and short-changed schoolchildren out of something like two trillion hours of in-person learning (1).

Now Vladimir Putin is waging a geopolitical war via Ukraine that the West is trying desperately to keep cool, so that it can keep on getting cheap gas from Russia and avoid civil war at home.

According to the Ukrainian president's chief economic advisor, Oleg Ustenk, both the UK and US are continuing to buy huge amounts of Russian oil, despite sanctions. In the US, for example, 'in what can only be described as a global laundering operation', he writes in the *Financial Times*, 'Russian crude is taken to foreign refineries and then imported as petrol. Once the oil has been refined into other products, it can legally enter the country without breaking sanctions' (2).

Even with these inventive ways to keep oil and weapons flowing across borders, energy prices are still rising sharply. With the collapse of globalisation under the weight of COVID-related labour and raw material shortages, the cost of living is rising dramatically. In the UK, with unions waging their own war on greedy bosses, and winning - see for example the recent victory of council-employed bin workers in Coventry - Tories are understandably having flashbacks to the 1970s.

We also never really recovered from the 2008 Financial Crisis. Over a decade of stagnation, un-

and under-employment, rising inequality and privatisation have broken communities and left young people in particular with an uncertain future.

The only thing that millennials like myself can be certain of is that we will be worse off than our parents. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, it now takes on average 21 years to save up for the deposit on a mortgage - this moves us a long way from Maggie Thatcher's property-owning democracy (3).

With the pandemic scarring young people's lifetime earnings even further, meritocracy remains but a bad joke for the 'pandemial' generation. As argued in my new book, *No Consolation: Radical Politics in Terrifying Times*, the poisoned chalice of commodified higher education only undermines even further the ideology of human capital - the idea that investment in education is an individual's responsibility and should be financed by debt if necessary. As pointed out by PSE's own Patrick Ainley, life in the 21st century increasingly feels like 'running up a down escalator' (4).

And then there's climate change. Perhaps the only redeeming feature of the pandemic was the way that it helped people reconnect with nature. During lockdown, those of us lucky enough not to have to work on the COVID-19 frontline saving lives or delivering parcels for Amazon spent more time outside, walking, gardening, cycling. As a result, the penny dropped: we are destroying the planet.

However, once the shock and novelty of lockdown wore off (for some it was a nightmare from beginning to end), this experience turned into a realisation that no one is actually doing anything about it. As Greta Thunberg put it beautifully: 'Blah, blah, blah. This is all we hear from our so-called leaders. Words that sound great but so far have not led to action. Our hopes and ambitions drown in their empty promises' (5).

Everything is connected

What Marxism does help with is seeing how all this is connected.

We are constantly told that the pandemic was 'unprecedented'. Never has a word been so overused. It was not unprecedented. In 2016, Marxist epidemiologist Rob Wallace published a book, *Big Farms Make Big Flu: Dispatches on Infectious Disease, Agribusiness, and the Nature of Science*. In the book, Wallace traces the origins of other pandemics like SARS, Avian Flu and Ebola, to the logic of capitalist reproduction. For Wallace, it is the interconnected system of industrial farming and globalised supply chains that are making such pandemics more and more likely.

Pandemics are caused by two related tendencies, he argues. On the one hand, factory farms with their livestock monocultures make it easier for pathogens to spread. On the other, when these factory farms expand into rural hinterlands, these animals encounter wild species like bats, contracting diseases like SARS. Thanks to their genetic homogeneity, these farms become hyper-competitive environments that are the perfect breeding grounds for new, deadly viruses (6). As these viruses get passed along the food chain, they get closer and closer to being able to infect humans, so when livestock arrives at wet markets in places like Wuhan, they start a pandemic.

Similar processes related to the logic of accumulation are behind the other crises mentioned above. The war in Ukraine, for example, can at least be partly explained by Putin's troubles at home. As suggested by Sergei Guriev, author of *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*, economic stagnation in Russia has undermined Putin's iron grip on power, especially with young people. With corruption short-circuiting real economic growth, Putin has turned to warmongering as a way to restore public confidence (7).

For Marxists like John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff, the 2008 Financial Crisis was also driven by stagnation. Financialisation helped to hide the fact that the expansion of the real global economy was slowing. In the 1970s, just before Western neoliberalism unshackled stock markets, real GDP growth in the US had dropped to around three per cent from double that during the 1940s. Like war - pointing to another factor shaping today's geopolitics - financialisation provides a short-term stimulus to growth.

But when this bubble eventually burst, and people started to default on the bad debt sold to them by deregulated banks, the underlying problems of the global economy came again to the fore. After socialising the cost of the crisis onto ordinary people via austerity and more privatisation, economies returned to their normal sluggish state. Meanwhile, the rich got even richer, the poor even poorer.

And climate change? This one is perhaps more obvious. Without dirty energy, there would be no capitalist system. Coal fuelled the industrial revolution, cheap oil globalisation. Thanks to fossil-fuelled expansion, capitalism has doubled the normal levels of CO2 in the atmosphere, warming the planet by about one degree Celsius. As noted by NASA, the 'recent relentless rise in CO2 shows a remarkably constant relationship with fossil-fuel burning and can be well accounted for based on the simple premise that about 60 percent of fossil-fuel emissions stay in the air' (8).

The consolations of theory

Such holistic explanations are essential in understanding the world. But they can also be a vice

Having an explanation for disturbing events can make us feel better about their consequences. But in the case of social problems that require collective solutions, explanations can also prevent action. In my new book, I draw again on the work of early twentieth century philosopher John Dewey, who called this phenomenon 'consolation'. Like many of his concepts, this is an everyday word with an expanded usage. If you Google 'consolation' you'll find the following definition: 'comfort received by a person after a loss or disappointment'. Going back to Marxism, you can perhaps see how I'm using this concept. Marxists sometimes turn to theory to find solace in the face of a world that doesn't conform to the predictions of historical materialism. The working class does not just throw off its chains; capitalism does not collapse under the weight of its internal contradictions.

But consolation is not just a psychological concept. It highlights the social basis of theory, which often pretends to be detached from history. Marxism, like all theories, comes out of a particular social experience, and survives on the basis that it speaks to a continued collective struggle. So, when Marx talked about 'praxis', he wasn't just referring to the hackneyed phrase that philosophers have 'hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways, the point,

however, is to change it' (9). He was talking about theory as a living thing, something that evolves and adapts to the collective needs of those who feel it still has relevance.

Theory also has social consequences. A good theory in the right hands can make a huge difference. A bad one can lose a war. A good theory is also in some sense truer than a bad one - it more accurately reveals the world for what it is, in its totality. Ideology, in the Marxist sense, is essentially a theory that distorts the world, furthering the interests of the class that wields it. Capitalist ideology reduces the world to individuals, economic interactions, and profit, nothing else. It is false, therefore, to say that Marxism is just another ideology, because it in fact tries to expand our consciousness of the world. Marxism is only ideology if it rationalises another form of domination.

This is not to say that capitalist ideology is crude or static. Far from it. If anything, capitalist ideology is more dynamic than Marxist theory today. Capitalist ideologues bear a huge responsibility; they must continually re-interpret the world to cover up the limitations of the capitalist system. They prove Dewey's history of philosophy. As intellectuals in a system that is now preventing social change, rather than promoting it, ideologues must ensure that rulers can preserve the status quo.

Neoliberal consolation

In *No Consolation*, I examine the remarkable adaptiveness of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism emerged out of the socialist calculation debates of the 1920s, when right-wing economists like F. A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises battled socialist theorists to try and discredit any form of economic planning. After losing the war of ideas during the inter-war period, these radical right-wingers went underground, and in the later 1940s started building a transnational movement to promote their ideas to what we would now call political and social 'influencers' (10). They even created a new institution between academia and the media to make ideology look like respectable research: the think tank.

In the 1970s, when the post-war compromise collapsed, and stagnation returned, a new generation of libertarian politicians found in neoliberalism the ideological tools they needed to wage this war anew: anti-communism and collectivism, financial liberalisation, free trade and the privatisation of public services. In the UK, these

ideas were put into practice by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government; she smashed the unions, unshackled the corporate and financial sectors, and began unlocking for capital the value stored up in the commons.

When the bubble finally burst, neoliberals had to pick up the pieces of capitalist ideology once again. As Will Davies explains, the 2008 Financial Crisis seemed to undermine the key neoliberal belief that people are rational actors, and that all markets have to do is coordinate individual economic behaviour (11). As I argue in Chapter 2 of *No Consolation*, behavioural economists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein invented a theory of 'nudging' to solve this problem. Based on some questionable behavioural science, Thaler and Sunstein proposed that people aren't actually rational and that governments should have the right to manipulate people into behaving more rationally.

At the core of this innovation is Milton Friedman's 'as if' methodology. Without going into too much detail - I explain this more fully in my previous book, *The Method of Democracy* (12) - Friedman developed a philosophy of economics as a science in which theory no longer needs to answer to the facts of historical experience. If people don't conform to rational choice theory, for example, economists shouldn't assume that the theory is wrong. They should proceed as if it were true and find the factors that are interfering with its verification.

Politically, this means that the job of neoliberal governments is to remove impediments to the market, such as trade unions, public ownership, anti-trust laws. That the market doesn't work, is prone to crisis and is dominated by multinational monopolies is not to say that markets don't work, or that neoliberalism is false, only that its remedies must be applied more vigilantly. Thaler and Sunstein's 'libertarian paternalism' is the application of this methodology to post-crisis reality. It is no coincidence that it was taken up enthusiastically by post-crisis Western governments: David Cameron set up the 'nudge unit' and Barack Obama employed Sunstein as an adviser.

Class Divisions

In the wake of the pandemic, neoliberal ideology is adapting again. The widespread realisation that we are destroying the planet has forced the capitalist class to respond to the climate crisis. It has done so by largely appropriating the language of the left. A new wave of 'woke' CEOs, bankers and corporate

influencers talk about the need for a Green New Deal, just transition and a fairer kind of capitalism (13). While this works to hide the lack of real action, it also signals a move to profit from the crisis. Multinationals realise the game is up and want to be the monopolists of the green economy.

In *No Consolation*, I read Bill Gates's latest book, *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster*, as a contribution to this progressive neoliberal adaptation. Pulling no punches, Gates insists that we have to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions to as close to zero as quickly as possible. But the method is controversial. Debunking many widely accepted means to achieve this aim, such as wind energy, reforestation and veganism, Gates advocates instead high-tech, capital-intensive solutions: mini nuclear reactors, carbon extraction and geoengineering - tech he happens to have many shares in.

However, the capitalist class is not united in this approach. The fossil fuel industry leads a powerful reactionary faction, exerting a profound influence on not just governments but on consumers through the impact of energy prices on everything else. It has spent decades manoeuvring against climate action, discrediting climate science and spending billions on government lobbying. Increasingly desperate, they are now turning to the far right to help their cause. In the UK, for example, the dark-money-funded Global Warming Policy Foundation and new post-Brexit campaign group are working together to undermine the country's already lacklustre net zero efforts (14).

The war in Ukraine has sharpened these divisions, highlighting Putin's role as a beacon of resistance to progressive neoliberalism. Emboldened by Putin's stance and strengthened by the pandemic's widening divisions and festering paranoia, European far-right parties in Italy, Spain and France are surging again in popularity. The links between the international far right and the fossil fuel industry are not difficult to identify. For example, Trump's top funder in 2016 was Kelcy Lee Warren, co-founder of the Energy Transfer Partnership that built the Dakota Access shale oil pipeline (15).

Providing the ideology for this logical alliance of right-wing political parties and of dirty energy investors are influencers like Jordan Peterson. Author of conservative self-help book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, with millions of Instagram, Twitter and YouTube followers, Peterson recently appeared on the Joe Rogan podcast likening climate science to gambling on the stock market, justifying his views with reference to fossil fuel funded climate change denier S. Fred Singer.

Even more recently, and to my point, Peterson appeared in *The Telegraph* attacking climate science, using very similar arguments. What is interesting about this intervention is that he did not pick on snowflake lefties, but archetypal representatives of progressive neoliberalism, Deloitte. Peterson accuses the consultancy of leading a 'cabal of utopians operating in the media, corporate and government fronts, wielding a nightmarish vision of environmental apocalypse'. Once again comparing climate modelling to stock market speculation, Peterson argues for free markets instead: 'the best model of the environment we can generate' (16).

Both tendencies can be interpreted as forms of neoliberal consolation. While progressive neoliberalism accepts the reality of climate change, it does so on the basis that it will maintain, if not improve, profitability. Reactionary neoliberalism, meanwhile, is essentially an extreme form of neoliberalism. It is happy to abandon all priorities other than the profit motive. If it's between socialism or barbarism, the Koch family is happy to choose the latter. Neither faction seeks to challenge the domination of finance, the absolute power of corporations over both governments and labour, or the privatisation of public services.

Optimism of the will

In the face of climate change, left-wing consolation is also taking on new forms. Having not built a popular, enduring and militant base during the Corbyn and Sanders years, the democratic socialist movement has become more idealistic. One of the reasons that the language of the green left was so easy to appropriate was that it was based in policy, rather than praxis. The strategy with the Green New Deal seemed to be to sneak socialism in through the front door, like a kind of political Trojan Horse. If the capitalist class can be convinced of 'green growth' then maybe it will also accept some socialist conditions on growth - international climate justice, public ownership, an expanded role for trade unions, progressive taxation, etc.

Some versions of the Green New Deal are less idealistic, for example Kate Aronoff et al's *A Planet to Win*. In this book, the authors stress the difference between socialist and 'faux' Green New Deals like Gates's, which focus on 'swapping clean energy for fossil fuels'. They advocate genuinely radical policies that would seriously challenge capitalism's right to control production, for example democratic, public control of 'much of the economy'

(17). However, by avoiding thorny questions about the fundamental compatibility of capitalism and 'sustainability', as well as how we will move people from passive consumption to collective climate action, the effect remains the same.

Another left cliché, if we can recover its original force, can help us here. Antonio Gramsci urged leftists to have 'pessimism of the intellect' and 'optimism of the will' (17). Today, I think that the former involves a kind of vigilance in identifying and rejecting all forms of collective consolation. In the previous section, I described how the green left favours 'optimism of the intellect' over such an approach. In what follows, I want to draw on an example from my own political experience to try to explain what I think 'optimism of the will', by contrast, might look like in the current context.

In 2019, just before the pandemic, and before the collapse of Corbynism, I set up with some other red-green progressives in Coventry a local Green New Deal group. I wanted to work out in practice what such a framework would mean at a grassroots level, to build the social base that the Labour Party would actually need to carry through its ambitious climate action plans. One of the projects we became involved with was a Lucas Plan-inspired initiative at Rolls Royce's Ansty site, where jobs were under threat from the devastating impact of the pandemic on the civil aviation industry.

With the help of Zarah Sultana, MP for Coventry South, we began a series of conversations with Unite convenors at the plant, which makes jet engine fan cases for commercial aircraft. Some of the most highly skilled engineers in the world, Ansty shop-floor workers were already thinking about how else their knowledge, experience and equipment could be used. In preliminary discussions, also with other sites like Inchinnan, Renfrewshire - which makes turbine blades and aerofoils - the idea of Rolls Royce-branded wind energy turbines came up almost immediately.

On the basis of this idea as one possible avenue for diversification, Coventry Green New Deal presented to Rolls Royce management on request of Unite (19) a plan for a series of workshops, modelled on the Lucas Plan, which would take workers from the current situation - their industrial, social, political and environmental context on the one hand, their skills, creativity and machinery on the other - to a set of prototypes that would bring in additional, socially useful, perhaps even profitable, work to these civil aviation sites - Ansty, Inchinnan and Barnoldswick - in future.

Management was interested in, but dismissive of, the wind turbines proposal, as they had their own plan for green diversification centred on sustainable aviation and small modular nuclear reactors - a controversial technology that has the support of the UK government. On the workshops, there was just no shared understanding of what worker-led research and development would add to the company's existing, top-down product development model. As with the Lucas Plan, discussion broke down the moment we questioned management's right to decide what and how to produce (20).

The role of educators

While we have not moved very far forward in our Lucas Plan for Rolls Royce, we have learned a lot about how hard it is to put the idea of a 'just transition' into practice. We are absolutely committed to the project, because we believe that projects like this are crucial to the future of trade unionism and red-green socialism. Rather than climate change being an afterthought or side project of the labour movement, which it still, unfortunately, is, projects like this put transition at the heart of the bargaining process itself. They have the potential to move both the environmentalists and socialists thinking about the environment from the abstract to the very concrete.

I also believe that it represents a model for how educators can be involved right at the coalface of technological and social change. Normally, when we talk about just transition, we assume that educators will need to help workers in dirty industries retrain for new, green jobs. But this is already a defensive strategy. What the Rolls Royce and original Lucas Plan examples assume is that workers should challenge the priorities of companies in these industries and force employers to diversify into socially useful, ecological production. This not only ensures that worker experience and knowledge is repurposed but also that their consciousness and collective intelligence (21) is expanded.

This completely changes the educational relationship with regard to just transition. Rather than providing a poorly funded and supported service to people thrown out of work, with all the psychological impact this has on individuals and communities, educators can act as comrade-facilitators helping workers to fight for their collective future. Short-circuiting the service model of education, which is now being transformed into a commodity, and directly concerned with building working-class power, this would also be a renewal of

the independent working-class education tradition that *PSE* editor Colin Waugh has written so eloquently about in these pages (22).

There is perhaps an even more important role that educators can play, however. Returning to the observation that life for young people feels increasingly like running up a down escalator, educators are also working within a crucial node of neoliberal contradiction. University educators especially are responsible for delivering a commodity that has an increasing financial value but a diminishing social one. At the same time that the commodification of education is making education work increasingly unbearable, it is feeding disillusionment and alienation for each generation forced to consume it.

In *No Consolation*, I compare the experience of people growing up in 1960s France with that of young people today. Just before the student-led insurgency of 1968, French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron noted how the social devaluing of education 'engenders a sort of collective disillusionment' among young people. 'Finding it has been taken for a ride', the next generation is inclined to 'extend to all institutions the mixture of revolt and resentment it feels toward the educational system' (23).

In other words, anger generated by the false promises of meritocracy can turn into anger at the whole system. If this anger is converted into progressive politics in solidarity with people suffering from related social contradictions, it can, like it did in '68, produce a revolutionary movement.

No easy answers

There will, however, be no utopian conclusions. The consequences of social contradiction within education noted above can also be captured by the far right and its influencers, who also operate in this space. Reactionaries are fighting a 'culture war' within institutions exactly to funnel this discontent into their version of the neoliberal restoration. In the US, this has been frighteningly successful. Trump may be gone, for now, but a new wave of extremist state governors is introducing totalitarian measures to 'defend' free speech on campuses and ban progressivism in schools (24).

But it's outside institutions where the far right have a huge advantage over the left in their access to young people. According to the latest Ofcom research, a staggering 99 per cent of UK children aged 3-17

went online in 2021 (25). YouTube - where, as already noted, videos by right-wing influencers like Jordan Peterson can reach over ten million views - is the most used platform for young people. So, when Ofcom also reports that children's engagement with news and social justice topics is 'increasingly slipping into conspiracy theory territory', it's hardly surprising (26).

As educators, then, what is our strategy for countering this influence? How do we win hearts and minds at this point of social reproduction, given these rapid changes in cultural technology and their mediation of social relations? This is a very difficult question, but I think one that we aren't even asking yet. We don't take the far right seriously, despite history. As before, we are in danger of treating figures like Jordan Peterson, as well as the friends and family that do take them seriously, as nutters or simple reactionary stooges. We do so at our peril.

The first step we must take is to recognise that collective intelligence and stupidity begin within experience. This is where social contradiction and natural disaster crash against the necessities and habits of everyday life. It is where we choose to engage or ignore the hopes and fears of the people around us. It is where education succeeds or fails, and, with it, our collective future.

Notes

1. See, for example, World Health Organization Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, 20 April 2021: <https://covid19.who.int/>. The number of deaths as a result of the coronavirus pandemic is itself a deeply controversial subject, with conspiracy theorists (most famously, Donald Trump) claiming a much lower number, and others claiming the opposite. WHO itself has criticised governments for under-reporting the number of direct and indirect deaths from SARS-Cov-2 in 2020 and 2021, putting the figure closer to 15m worldwide. See: <https://www.bmj.com/content/377/bmj.o1144>. On unemployment estimates, see the International Labour Organization's 'Monitor' series. For estimates of learning hours lost, see UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/schoolchildren-workdwide-have-lost-18-trillion-hours-counting-person-learning>.
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/e593ae2f-62c5-4d8a-8011-b18b6cdee5do>.
3. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021) *UK Poverty 2020/21*: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2020-21>, p. 75.

4. Ainley, P. (2016) *Betraying a Generation: How Education is Failing Young People*. Bristol: Policy Press, p. 2.
5. Greta Thunberg's speech at the Youth4Climate 'Driving Ambition' Pre-COP26 event. Video available on Thunberg's Twitter feed: <https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg/status/1442860615941468161>.
6. Chuang (2021) *Social Contagion and Other Material on Microbiological Class War in China*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, p. 13.
7. Guriev, 'Putin's dictatorship is now based on fear rather than spin', *Financial Times*: <https://www.ft.com/content/e58832c5-a35a-4bf4-8be7-359b4563c1c9>.
8. https://climate.nasa.gov/climate_resources/24/graphic-the-relentless-rise-of-carbon-dioxide/.
9. Marx, K. (1845/2002) 'Theses on Feuerbach': <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/>.
10. See, for example Burgin, A. (2015) *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
11. Davies, W. (2016) *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*. London: SAGE.
12. Ridley, D. (2021) *The Method of Democracy: John Dewey's Theory of Collective Intelligence*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
13. See for example Mariana Mazzucato's (2021) *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism*. London: Allen Lane.
14. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/global-warming-policy-foundation-net-zero-watch-koch-brothers/>.
15. <https://otherwords.org/fossil-fueled-fascism/>.
16. <https://archive.ph/HXNVO#selection-1551.1-1553.1>.
17. Aronoff, K., Battistoni, A., Cohen, D. A., and Riofrancos, T. (2019) *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*. London: Verso (Epub - no page references).
18. Gramsci actually took this phrase from Romain Rolland, quoting it in his early 1920 essay, 'An Address to the Anarchists': <https://libcom.org/article/address-anarchists-antonio-gramsci-1920>.
19. Unite were justifiably concerned that members might become disillusioned if the union led them down a garden path of alternative planning without any way to realise these alternatives, at the same time as the company was seeking rationalisation. The idea in presenting the workshops to management, with the example of wind turbine engines, was to get some facility time for workers to engage properly in the process, and a commitment to exploring how these ideas might become a reality using Rolls Royce resources, for example, market research, prototyping, etc.
20. See Wainwright, H. and Elliott, D. (2018) *The Lucas Plan - A New Trade Unionism in the Making?* Nottingham: Spokesman Books.
21. This concept has a particular use in my work that is expanded on in *No Consolation*, but mostly in *The Method of Democracy*.
22. See especially Waugh, C. (2009) *'Plebs': The Lost Legacy of Independent Working-Class Education*: <http://post16educator.org.uk>.
23. Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.-C. (1979) *The Inheritors: French Students and Their Relation to Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 84.
24. See, for example, the current situation in Florida, where governor and potential 2024 US presidential election Republican candidate Ron DeSantis is waging a war on academic freedom: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/university-florida-academic-freedom-row-deepens>.
25. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/ssets/pdf_file/oo24/234609/childrens-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2022.pdf.
26. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/234552/childrens-media-lives-2022-summary-report.pdf.
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Conspiracy as consolation

Stephen Cowden looks at why the Extreme Right is growing, and why we have to stop seeing their irrationality as 'irrational'.

Throughout 2019 Matthew Cronjager, an Essex teenager from a 'nice family', who had a number of close friends and who had won prizes in school for his academic work became heavily involved in far-right online chatrooms, posting his hatred for gay people, Muslims and 'powerful Jewish figures in banks and stuff', calling for a 'revolution'. As this involvement progressed, he developed a plan to murder one of his best friends, who was Asian, after finding out that he had slept with white girls. He posted: 'I've found someone I want to execute . . . he's a sand n****er that f***ed a white girl. . . . In fact I think 3 of them'. He boasted that, though they had been friends 'for ages', he could 'kill him like that' (Barnet, 2021). Fortunately the online chatroom where he posted his plans had been infiltrated by the police, and Cronjager was arrested and sentenced to eleven years in prison.

When we hear of situations like this we inevitably want to throw up our hands in horror and disbelief. It's an entirely understandable reaction, but one we need to get beyond if we are to understand the growth of the contemporary form of neo-Nazism and the way its conspiracy theories of 'white replacement' are across the internet, inspiring young men like Cronjager. These conspiracies, which articulate a mortal threat to the 'white race' from immigration and 'Marxist' multiculturalism, have become the central organising themes for the contemporary far right, and were central to the mass murders undertaken by Anders Breivik (2011), the Christchurch mosque killer Brent Harrison Tarrant (2019), as well as the most recent white supremacist murders in Buffalo (2022). The main slogan of the 2017 Charlottesville 'Unite the Right' rally was: 'You will not replace us! Jews will not replace us!'

The Extreme Right has now definitively re-emerged, with conspiracy theories central to their modus operandi. Why conspiracy theories? This is an important question, not least because the substantive content of these theories involves claims that are often not just manifestly absurd but offered without any evidence. Those of us who see it as urgent that we reinvent the fight against fascism need to understand that these theories appeal to people as 'sense-making'; that is, they help people understand what is happening to their lives in a highly unstable, uncertain reality. The appeal is not primarily to reason, but to the imagination

and emotions. It is also really important to understand that, despite their irrationality from the perspective of the reason which is at the centre of our conception of liberal modernity, conspiracy and disinformation are being used very effectively as a political campaigning tool, so in this sense they are not irrational at all. Look, for example, at the way Donald Trump used Twitter. Within the online space, conspiracy theories have become a political weapon whose form and content attacks those foundations of liberalism and democracy. This is the project of the far right (Bhatt, 2020:2). They also represent an epistemology where differences of view are never another facet to explore, always a threat - and this totalitarianism reflects what the far right actually believe.

We might take consolation from the fact that these sorts of 'fringe lunacy' have always existed, and that opinion polls continue to show that the majority of people dismiss and reject them. However, Michael Butter's book *The Nature of Conspiracy Theories* (2020) offers a serious note of caution with this argument. What Butter captures that is so significant and dangerous about them is not how widely they are believed; indeed he shows how earlier in the 20th century conspiracy theories were much more widely believed than now. Rather, the issue is the role of the internet. This has not only made conspiracy theories much more accessible, but has itself 'been a catalyst for the fragmentation of the public sphere' (2020:7). In other words, there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the dissemination of conspiracy theories within the far-right online space and the decline of a common public sphere of debate. While the official media have, in the UK at least, always been central to the creation of an 'authoritarian populist' hegemony, which has been central to Thatcherite ideology (Hall, 1975), there were limits to this, in that these ideas were always open to contestation, as they were still situated within the common sphere of debate on which the UK's liberal modernity was based. With internet conspiracy theory, no such scrutiny or accountability operates; the public space, if it even still exists, is bypassed. This sense of a public sphere has been very important to the way the Left has been able to put forward its arguments, to how racism, sexism and homophobia have been challenged, and to how black

communities and their leftwing allies mobilised against, and politically defeated, the fascist National Front in the 1970s and 80s.

So we're in a different situation now, and this brings us back to the ideas David Ridley puts forward in *No Consolation*. This book is about the way we are now faced with a level of radical uncertainty much greater than we have had to address and react to previously, of which the re-emergence of diverse forms of extreme right nationalism, religious fundamentalism and extreme forms of misogyny are important expressions. These deeply regressive ideologies, with their language of blame, appeal to a consoling image of the past - often a past which never existed, but one which offers more hope than the present to many people. The disillusionment with the present political system, which is a consequence of the neoliberal takeover of the state, now openly working at the behest of corporate and financial interests - has significantly undermined the state's capacity to represent its own ideas of liberal modernity and meritocracy, and created the soil in which the extreme right plants its seeds. So where the world is experienced as a frightening and confusing place, and where the anchoring reference points of meaning seem to have been wrenched from their moorings, these conspiracy narratives form a powerful rallying call for their supporters, and offer new anchor points. The far right has created a community of shared meaning and acceptance around this. So despite the almost ridiculous irrationality of their substantive content, their growth, and the resultant violent hatred, are telling us something really important.

When David and I talked about *No Consolation*, he spoke of the dilemma of needing to combine a sense of how difficult things are at present with a sense of hope, and this is the contemporary challenge for the Left, feminists and anti-racists faced with the growth of the far right. As David explains in its introduction, the book wasn't just written within the Covid pandemic, but this was crucial in helping him to think through the political challenges we face. The pandemic brought to light both the illness, death and personal isolation which people went through, but also how people found ways to support and aid each other through it. In my suburban street in Leamington there is now, as a direct consequence of this, more connection, support and mutual aid between people than there has ever been in the twenty years I've lived here. The anthropologist Alain Bertho has noted similarly that in the pandemic was:

Our countries did not hold out thanks to state authoritarianism, but thanks to the mobilization of popular skills: inventiveness, collective and individual genius. The survival of people in their daily lives has been ensured by non-prescribed professional cooperation and local solidarity networks, and not by institutional policy. This

popular collective intelligence embodies an authentic dynamic of re-democratization. *We must stop trying to save representative democracy at all costs and concentrate on the democratic processes really at work today.* (Bertho: 2021)

This last sentence strikes me as the key message we need to take on board to fight the re-emerged and re-energised far right. We need organisation, but not just the same sort as in previous mobilisations against fascism, where battles on the streets were so important. We won't be able to fight these ideas just by appealing to liberalism's traditional conceptions of democracy and equality, important as these are, and we can't limit ourselves to exposing them in what remains of the public sphere, because their proponents have found a way to operate completely outside of this. The key point is that we live in a society of radical interconnectedness and inter-dependence. The pandemic showed us how we need each other, and that, by organising around this, we can overcome socially manufactured differences between people, thus creating new forms of sociality and conviviality. It is by continuing to do this, and doing a lot more of it, that we can counter the appeal of the far right, with their ridiculous language of hate, and the entirely false consolation it offers to people.

This article is an out-take from a longer piece I wrote with Nira Yuval-Davis on the Far Right and the Covid Pandemic for the Journal *Feminist Dissent*, called 'Contested narratives of the pandemic crisis: the far right, anti-vaxxers and freedom of speech'. See the *Feminist Dissent* website for the longer piece: <https://feministdissent.org>.

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From safety to where?

Dan Taylor

The key argument of David Ridley's incisive book is that we have lost sight of the power of collective intelligence. The great crises of recent times - the 2008 financial crash, Covid-19, climate change, to the cost-of-living crisis now engulfing so many - have each been marked by a failure of critical thinking done together. In place of questions and ideas that redefine what is possible or imaginable, or study groups committed to understanding and debating the nature of power and inequality - have come instead a raft of platitudes, certainties and gormless media personalities. Not collective intelligence, then, but a kind of individual retreat and refuge into what is at hand. A timesheet-existence in which all work is accounted for (and then some) with life's little pleasures crammed in between, and the pain points managed. Such things make life less intolerable, sometimes even fun. But explain to a time-traveller from fifty years ago that a rather extremist faction of neoclassical economists had managed to transform the entire world in their image, a place where 'growth', 'aspiration' and 'markets' had become magical keywords to vanquish the baddies of solidarity, government and collectivism - and they'd laugh, I think.

But we trundle on. And what stops these wheels from falling off is what David Ridley calls 'consolations'. He gets the term from John Dewey, upon whom he wrote an insightful and important book called *The Method of Democracy* in 2021. What are consolations? They are a 'social and psychological tendency in which people erect theoretical fortresses of certainty to compensate for the chaos and absurdity of reality'. As coping mechanisms, they sound fair enough. Dewey had probably got the term off Seneca, the Stoic philosopher and wealthy Roman politician whose beautiful, invigorating prose commends doing not an awful lot about social injustices. Because the problem is when such consolations are used either to look away from the complexity and difficulty of the

world around us, and indulge in what one recent member of the government called 'fairytale thinking' about power. Consolations do not elucidate, they pacify.

These pipe-dreams of the left and the right are a real danger for critical thinking and collective inquiry, thinks David. Instead of meeting the severity and possibility of the crises of the day, the proponents of these consolations encourage a rather dangerous and deluded view that everything as it stands right now will work out OK, so we needn't do too much about it.

Among such consolations he lists neoliberalism, and the 'new Green Prometheanism' of Bill Gates, which argues for technological fixes to climate change. But he also criticises some of the Green New Deal campaigners of the Left for their 'consolations'. While understandably working to bring about a 'just transition' to a more sustainable world, they've done so not through argumentation, persuasion or democratic deliberation, but sometimes instead through a rather indirect, top-down policy mode that perpetuates a power gap between the authority of expertise and the little public.

The challenge of *No Consolation* then is to 'see the world aright'. With what sort of lenses? We've heard the warnings against magical thinking. Assuming that decades of austerity or climate crisis will inevitably bring about a post-work nirvana is a consolation. There's a sense of fear in this book (again understandably), interspersed with indignation. As the Earth's life support systems deteriorate through climate change, the social fabric and mental wellbeing of many people in many places also frays. These are probably linked, and they necessitate a systemic analysis and path towards consciousness raising, across communities.

Of course, one needs to dream, and dreams come along whether we wish them to or no. And as Joseph Conrad, navigator of the vicious backwaters of the 19th century imperial world, once wrote, 'we live as we dream, alone'. But there's the rub. A life lived alone is one of nightmares and dreaming. Speculative hopes are just consolations; aimless or reactive anger, like say that of the far right blaming Black Lives Matter or George Soros for the ills of the world, may set out (perhaps) with a sense that wrongdoing is occurring but soon become blinded from seeking the causes of that wrongdoing by the illusory sense of power and control anger provides in times otherwise marked by uncertainty and pain.

But, in a way like how his fellow visionary George Eliot saw it, long ago, 'hope must be matched by action'. Something involving, perhaps, sympathetic feeling, the social and political possibilities that come when we can transport ourselves into other people's shoes, 'train our imagination to go visiting' as Hannah Arendt once put it. What sort of action then?

The book is sometimes hazy on what action means, which is fair enough, given that until recently so much of political life and resistance was passive, like tuning into *Have I Got News For You* on a bad batch of psychedelics. David tells us that 'intelligent collective action emerges "naturally" out of the experience of social contradiction'. People inevitably come across such contradictions - things that don't work, that don't make sense, that seem to reflect an initially intangible sense of unfairness, sometimes rationalised as the way of the world. But often, not much comes of that. It 'requires collective inquiry to change conditions in the future', says David, to get people talking and thinking together to identify the origins of negative consequences. He gives the example of trade union strikes. Taking action not only transforms the person who strikes, upending the old world of workplace and social relations, and it brings about new bonds of solidarity, a 'form of interpersonal bond generated through collective action'.

But what do we mean by collective action, or collective intelligence? Collective intelligence doesn't begin with a certain sacred text or worldview that needs to be proven right. It begins with an active, open-ended inquiry taking place right now into the conditions of society around us. It's messy, open-ended, outward focused.

Collective intelligence also goes from the traditional mode of the omniscient individual scholar, notching up publications in top journals like an entrepreneur of

one's own little brand, to projects that raise consciousness of issues in communities where we actually live, from those communities, and with them.

This might sound like some of the aspirations behind the old workers' education movement, even historic and now, to some ears, rather strange sounding institutions like the Plebs League and the Labour College. This startling little intervention is aware of its untimeliness - there are no consolations in terrifying times. But there's a useful emphasis there, particularly in Zoom-tutorial times, of the importance of the extramural. David writes:

if education workers can rediscover their collective power, unite with students and communities around shared material concerns, a new set of democratic institutions could be built to nurture and politicise collective intelligence. It's true, right now, this model seems utopian. I seem to be committing to another form of 'consolation'. But as Dewey always said, we need an 'end-in-view' to guide action'.

What kind of end? It would be easy here to fall back on the lessons of history - past examples of good collective inquiry, like the Lucas Plan (1973) or the Royal Docks Plan (1981), two topics our author has written well on. But one of the strangest and most exciting aspects of this book is where David attempts to imagine possible worlds in the future. Combining sci-fi with social critique, these scenes find everyday women and men wrestling with climate breakdown, King Arthur conspiracy nuts and the breakdown of the near-future.

If you're unsure where that leaves you, then I recommend two things: buy the book, and then use it as a basis of talking with colleagues and students about what this knowledge and know-how is supposed to do. There are no easy answers here - but in the moment of asking why and how together, something new is happening. And something needs to happen.



Fundamental questions posed for students and teachers

Patrick Ainley

David Ridley, *No Consolation. Radical Politics in Terrifying Times*. Peter Lang.

'We have all been stumbling through our lives since 2008', David Ridley says in his preface to this densely argued but very readable book. It presents 'interventions' to unravel the confusions inflicted upon young people most directly facing climate change, economic crisis and war. Only their collective intelligence can transform 'the strange world' imposed by 'radicalised neoliberalism' 'where you buy your own truth' in commodified schools, colleges and universities. United with students and communities, Ridley concludes education workers can recover their collective power to nurture a new future. It is a blast of hope against the consolations of despair!

Reading and discussing this book during the strange cesura of summer drought, when in the heat all talk seemed to be of the coming winter cold, David's prefatory title from Greta Thunberg never seemed so apt: '*Blah, blah, blah* . . . This is all we hear from our so-called leaders . . . Our hopes and ambitions drown in their empty promises'. It demonstrates the urgency of his focus upon youth who:

cannot wait for a political party to win an election which could be in two years' time . . . but have got to have solutions now . . . We need to rediscover our collective intelligence, by fighting battles and winning and then building movements out of specific causes. When we come together to fight and win, we don't just make the world a better place, and thereby shatter the hold of pessimism . . . We also create institutions that pool our individual experiences, knowledge and capacities that form the foundations of radical democracy . . . the real alternative to the market, which doesn't intelligently match supply and demand through a mysterious, computerlike price mechanism, but in fact redirects wealth and power to the already wealthy and already powerful, while creating chaos for everyone else.

Hence David's argument against 'the social and psychological tendency to erect theoretical fortresses of certainty to compensate for the chaos and absurdity of reality' in which 'nostalgia compensates for chaos

and order is sought in authority'. Instead, he uses John Dewey 'to reconstruct a theory of collective intelligence, setting this theory against both the slippery free market ideology of neoliberalism and the pessimism of academic critical theory to propose an alternative practice of intelligent democracy as a way out of the mess we find ourselves in'. 'Such intelligent collective action emerges "naturally" out of the experience of social contradiction' but 'requires collective inquiry to change conditions in the future'. Thus the centrality of education, especially universities, to develop and sustain collective intelligence. Yet this seems to entail a long march through the educational institutions, since - unlike Dewey - action is not based in the schools but must wait until students at universities develop the consciousness that led French students onto the streets in 1968.

The circumstances are very different today however: following free-market failure, centralised university administrations are consolidating to reduce not increase home student numbers by increasing fees while closing academic institutions redesignated as technical in line with T-levels imposed by government upon schools and colleges from 14+. Meanwhile, university departments of education are slated for closure with platformed provision of teacher training across regionalised multi-academy trusts. As has been argued in *PSE*, this consolidation is what university staff are currently up against, with widespread student support but so far few signs of revolutionary collective intelligence transforming universities into combines modelled on the 1976 Combine Shop Stewards Committee's alternative Plan for Lucas Aerospace as David advocates. True, many students have and will join trades unions struggling for a living wage and may throw open their occupied facilities to support local communities, campaigns and variously funded bottom-up social initiatives, for instance, providing 'warm banks' that may become hotbeds for gathering discontent.

Schools, colleges and universities can also integrate with local industry and commerce in public and private services, through research and support for a real Green New Deal, not merely by increasing 'skills' (meaning invariably certificates) as the universal

panacea of training to 'level up' regions and widen social mobility since - how many times must we say this? - skills do not create jobs! What is required for skilled employment is human-centred productive investment. Whether such clarity will be attained to chart viable ways forward is less certain. Especially as the crisis demands a social mobilisation unparalleled in peacetime towards degrowth, reversing the priority of overproduction for profit realised in the sale of more and more commodities in the priorities of overproduction for profit to sell more and more commodities hyped to individualised consumers in an overstimulated market.

The main English political parties are plainly politically bankrupt in face of such a challenge after nearly forty years accepting as unassailable orthodoxy a model of governance that elevated the weak regulation of a small state to run society like the economy. They are therefore unable to resolve their complementary crises of - on the one hand - social democracy of which Corbynism was symptomatic or - on the other - to advance beyond reversion to Thatcherite/Blairite solutions that depended upon debt but which are no longer viable since 2008. So, after all but the remnants of public services have been sold off for speculation by global finance capital, market failures everywhere presage consolidation under the central direction of a corporate state, rather than following growing popular pressure for renationalisation under democratic control and the renunciation of the failed Thatcher project. Yet Truss now enforces the zombie responses of moribund neo-liberalism yet again, because, as the Chinese used to say, 'If you don't hit it, even a Paper Tiger won't fall down'!

Instead, David summarises the international context in which neo-liberalism staggers on as:

'Joe Biden represents the progressive wing of international capital. He wants to rebuild America through investment in infrastructure and a just transition. However, despite running on a radical platform, this is not a socialist Green New Deal. It is, rather, an investment vehicle for a new green capitalism. Nevertheless, it is better than fascism, and Trump is waiting just round the corner to pounce if Biden fails. In one sense, the fate of the planet lies with the US. A progressive America would do much to repair the foundations of Western capitalism, helping it stumble along to the next crisis. A fascist one would massively boost the international far right, halt and even reverse progress on global warming and plunge the world into further chaos'.

Brexited Britain turned from pluralism to populism aided by oligarchs but now Ukrainian resistance to Russian invasion promises a new European security architecture before US imperialism is pushed by its own internal logic to inflict war upon its rising rival, China. This development is fanned by impending climate chaos that increases anxiety and insecurity. However, in the

UK popularly supported trades unions are leading increasingly coordinated resistance that may collapse an empty vessel like Truss into a Heath-like failure to assert authority, while privatising what remains of welfare as urged by her free-market ultras. Although union membership is today not so large as it was in 1974, it is growing, as often multi-occupational trades unions embrace employees already on the individualised contracts that government seeks to impose on failed privatisations like rail, justified by new applications of technology for new patterns of post-covid provision. Even though fewer young people join unions than older (fewer vote also, in addition to being deliberately disenfranchised), trades unions offer them more than 'the false promises of education to give us a leg up' as school, college and university students desperately run up a down-escalator of devaluing educational qualifications, so as not to fall into insecure precarity at the bottom of 'the "pear shaped" tower block of modern life'.

In these circumstances, it may be that education at all levels is better subsumed under a theory of *praxis* that develops general intellect arising from situations rather than attempting to build collective intelligence in institutionalised education to apply to them. This would include all the influences acting upon social classes constituted by shared social situations and changing themselves as they struggle to change their circumstances, of which formal instruction or schooling are but a part. This is very different from the conventional view of 'powerful knowledge' - or rather - information-based education, in which institutions conform individuals to existing circumstances.

The most direct implications of this view of general intellect rather than collective intelligence are for learning at tertiary level. Here HE must recover itself in connection with FE, as both become theoretically informed and practically competent to present a universal entitlement to free lifelong adult and community Tertiary Education and training in or out of employment, full- or part-time, and including both creation and recreation. However, this requires the foundation of a general and comprehensive Primary and Secondary state schooling to foster 'fully developed individuals, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions they perform, are but so many ways of giving free scope to their own natural and acquired powers' (Marx 1971, 494).

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