

# Is Black and Red Dead?

University of Nottingham

7-8 September 2009

## Conference Report

Compiled by Alex Prichard

17/09/09

Since its foundation the ASN has had as its primary aim to foster institutional and inter-personal links between those working in the broad area of anarchist studies. The success of our first conference at Loughborough University in September 2008 was the product of three years of hard work to build this area of research. At the meeting that followed this first conference, it was suggested that a conference be held on the intersections between Marxism and anarchism. One year later, this conference is the idea made real. Our primary aim as a research network was to reach out to Marxist scholars and begin a new dialogue between the two traditions of thought. The secondary aim was to provide a space for people who felt they crossed the boundaries between Marxism and anarchism to present their work and discuss their ideas in a supportive and convivial environment.

The result was the first conference in living memory on the intersections between Marxism and anarchism. It was hosted by the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice at the University of Nottingham. The conference convenor was Dr Alex Prichard, co-founder of the Anarchist Studies Network. Saku Pinta drafted the initial call for papers and Dr Dave Berry worked to ensure the radical book stalls were part of the conference. The conference was convened in conjunction with the PSA Marxism Specialist Group. Special thanks to Professor Marc Cowling for his support with our bid to the PSA for funding. The event was also supported by four academic journals: *Anarchist Studies*, *Capital and Class*, *Critique-Journal of Socialist Theory*, *Historical Materialism* and *Studies in Marxism*. Special thanks also go to Sue Simpson at Nottingham University for her extensive administrative work, to Dr Tony Burns, co-director of the CSSGJ, for his coordination and for the financial assistance provided through the Centre, and to the Political Studies Association for a generous grant of £2000 to support the event.

The conference attracted 42 papers and a further 20 participants. It was a truly international conference with participants from the US, Canada, Australia, France, Italy, Greece, Ireland, Finland, and the UK. The range of topics reflected the geographic spread of the presenters and the spread of the case studies and movements analysed. The experiences of key individuals, such as Antonio Gramsci, Cornelius Castoriadis, C. L. R. James and a number of others encapsulated the controversies, trade-offs and developments in socialist thinking by refusing doctrinaire positions on ideology. The historical papers each in their own way illustrated that there are multiple anarchisms and multiple Marxisms; their form changing

according to the heritage of the traditions crossed, fused or transcended and the demands of the contexts in which these ideologies morphed and met. Each paper also illustrated how different contexts have created different forms of political agency over the past 150 years.

More theoretical papers discussed the analytical and conceptual problems involved in either explaining the traditional schism on the left or ways of overcoming it. Some called for clarity in method while investigating the schism, while others saw insurmountable philosophical problems in overcoming it. Papers on psychology, moral philosophy, liberation theology and Christian anarchism, the reconfiguring of the notion of 'the excluded' and others, all pushed their audience to think more clearly about the terms of the debate and the ontology and epistemology of political agency. Papers on publishing for the cause of revolutionary socialism and others on organising for social change all captured something of the experience of the past 150 years of socialist debate.

The discussions generated by the conference papers were always engaged and heated as well as respectful and generous; debate at the bar, post-conference, no less so! It is testament to the paper-givers and participants that such a difficult topic could be engaged with with such erudition and integrity. It is our ambition that an edited collection of the best essays from the conference be published as soon as possible.

The conference was also attended by AK Press, Sparrow's Nest (a Nottingham-based anarchist collective), Stair Books, while a number of University and other academic publishers sent in promotional material and books for sale. The conference did not host a plenary speaker, mainly because no one could think of an appropriate speaker to talk to both traditions. Indeed, if such a speaker could be found, someone who would be un-contentiously accepted by all, then there would have been far less purpose behind such a conference in the first place. It was also perhaps quite telling of the history of the left over the past 150 years that so few papers engaged with feminism and so few women presented (5/42). Childcare issues arose. Efforts were made prior to the conference to cater for these, but the University did not have the appropriate facilities. Also, disabled access was a problem which will not be overlooked by this organiser again. While we did our best to arrange the schedule in appropriate buildings, our choice of venue could have been better. The conference did not have a closing open plenary meeting where people could share their experiences of the event. This will be scheduled into any future conferences. Audio recordings were planned but those plans fell apart at the last minute. Some of the conference papers are available on line at <http://www.anarchist-studies-network.org.uk/IsBlackAndRedDead> .