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(Not Quite) In the Zone

By Ben Watson

With Mastaneh Shah-Shuja's recent book *Zones of Proletarian Development*, the anti-capitalist movement has finally found its political theorist. But, asks Ben Watson, can the lessons she gleans from the movement of movement's successes compete with the organisational and motivational power of the party?

Whatever happened to anti-capitalism? Now that, post-credit-crunch, governments worldwide are reconsidering the ideas of John Maynard Keynes, it's hard to recall the time when the free market and untrammelled capitalism reigned supreme. Yet this was so for nigh on two decades, from Ronald Reagan's defeat of the air-traffic controllers in August 1981 to the advent of anti-capitalism with a large, lively and well-publicised demonstration outside Liverpool Street station in June 1999 ('J18'). Anti-capitalism scored further hits with the teamsters-and-turtle-kids' Battle of Seattle versus the World Trade Organisation in November 1999 ('N30'), plus two unmissable May Days in London (2000, 2001). Until 9/11, it seemed as if anti-capitalism had a monopoly on catchy date-names, driven like stakes into Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history'. Then in 2001, a spectacular stunt (and/or mistake) by the incestuous terrorist/security forces made everything the left had achieved pale into insignificance: 9/11 eclipsed both J18 and N30 in the mass-media memory bank. This restoration was in turn rocked by the worldwide anti-war demonstrations on 15 February 2003 ('Don't Attack Iraq'), and by the 'credit crunch' of September 2008, which initiated the Keynesian response mentioned above. Politics was now globalised. In the '60s and '70s, the 'balance of payments' was the bogeyman, the value of Pound Sterling blazoned at the close of every TV news broadcast; now we watch the various share-price indices. In so far as we are thoughtful or rational (i.e. in so far as we watch the news), we're all capitalists now, so nationalism is no longer needed to make us (and our trade unions) 'tighten our belts'; anxiety about the international system (and world ecology) has replaced 'the national interest'. Obama and Brown are experts keeping the whole thing running, and we must trust their decisions, or we're doomed. Apparently.

In other words, the establishment doesn't dream up policy in a vacuum. It's in dialogue with its critics, with mass opposition and protest. Anti-capitalism helped get us where we are today. It changed things. As a music journalist in the '80s and '90s, words I depended on for a Marxist analysis ('bourgeois', 'capitalism', 'class') were routinely excised by editors ('in the interest of not alienating your readers'). After J18, they were allowed again. The *abseilers* who unrolled the banner proclaiming 'anti-capitalism' down a City office block did more for my freedom of expression than two decades of avant garde poetry or left paper-selling. After the demonstrations in February 2003, I could even use the menacing word 'imperialism' in print.

Anti-capitalism worked, but so far has not been honoured with a political theory. Its effectiveness caused much soul searching on the traditional left, organisational dilemmas some call a crisis. Mastaneh Shah-Shuja's book is therefore timely: it attempts to learn the lessons of anti-capitalist protest and develop a theory of political practice. So can we now jettison Lenin and become Shah-Shujaites? An independent researcher from an Afghan-Iraqi background, Shah-Shuja sees all Leninist worker parties as identical and identically malign: projects to contain revolution and steer

society back towards capitalism. The failure of the Russian Revolution is inscribed in every attempt at working-class organisation. Shah-Shuja is critical of anarchism too, but adopts its pre-knowledge of the sins of the Bolsheviks: there are no indications that even the popular accounts of the Russian Revolution by E.H. Carr, Isaac Deutscher or Victor Serge have been scanned. *Zones of Proletarian Development* is a contribution to Social Studies: historical scholarship is a non-issue. Instead, in assessing Bolshevism, Shah-Shuja applies a farrago of prejudice, rumour and blind assertion, accepting much of the libel of the right. If Lenin was simply a tyrant, one wants to know why researchers with no political axe to grind (editors of V.I. Vernadsky's book on the biosphere, for example, or Martin Miller's study of psychoanalysis in Bolshevik Russia) discover progressive legislation on ecology and sex no other state regime has ever countenanced. Political thinkers of the stature of Engels are condemned by digging out single statements at variance with today's liberal shibboleths, with no regard for intent or context. If I were a professor, I'd give Shah-Shuja hell at the viva. This idealist view of politics parties shape the world according to their ideas, so an imperialist Russia with gulags and the H-Bomb must have been Lenin's intent at the start cannot deal with historical actualities. But this isn't a history book. It's a political polemic based on anti-capitalism, arguing that boring politics won't win. On this, Shah-Shuja does have a point.

This 354 page book comes armed with a 33 page bibliography. It reads like a PhD thesis, with numbered paragraphs and that academic habit of announcing what you're going to say, saying it and then summarising again, as if repetition achieves clarity rather than irritation and boredom. Truly dialectical discourse recognises that exposition changes both writer and reader: a genuine 'summary' breaks into something new (if not, it's like listening to an inarticulate dimbo with a Power Point presentation and bullet points: insufferable). This explains why 'analytical' philosophers find Marx so frustrating: he never repeats a formulation ('never sticks to his definitions').

Shah-Shuja claims to be 'study-extending the class struggle' by deriving a 'conceptual tool-kit' from Vygotsky, Volosinov, Bakhtin and Activity Theory. These impressive names are raided for the usual postmodern list of preferences (flexibility over rigidity, equality over hierarchy, democracy over oppression, dialogue over monologue, creativity over mechanism etc. etc.), but without understanding how class analysis (i.e. Marx's theory) was the *crucial* insight for these thinkers. The 'proletarian' in Shah-Shuja's title confers a certain shock. It revives a term deleted from the postmodern/liberal lexicon (a shock first exploited when Stewart Home coined the phrase 'proletarian postmodernism'). However, here, 'proletarian' designates anyone who chooses to attend anti-capitalist protests. This is strange because such a temporary combination of people has no determinate relationship to capital. The Stop the War Coalition is excoriated for 'containing' protest on 15 February 2003, as if most people on the demonstration arrived 'tooled-up for insurrection'. This is the subjectivist vision of a few fired-up souls.

Shah-Shuja thinks otherwise, but after 15 February, the left *did* try to move for strike protests against the attack on Iraq. Unfortunately, it discovered that most protestors, however morally outraged by Bush and Blair, were not organised in class positions antagonistic to capitalism. In other words, the demonstration was not 'proletarian'. Therefore, despite the numbers, it did not have the political impact of the Poll Tax Riot of 1990. Anti-war mobilisations after 15 February became smaller and smaller, demoralising those who attended. Shah-Shuja attacks the left who want routine marches in order to buzz up contacts and recruit them, but it's hard to see in the absence of mass strikes and

occupations what other route serious revolutionaries should take. For Shah-Shuja, only practical transgressions of bourgeois law educate us in revolution. But, as we learned at Welling in 1993, if we declare we are going to take the law into our own hands and burn down a fascist headquarters, the state has no qualms about cracking hundreds of heads plus jail sentences for demonstrators caught on video to demonstrate who is really in charge. As the Bolsheviks showed, a successful revolution depends upon political organisation and strategic planning.

According to Shah-Shuja, 'zones of proletarian development' derives from Vygotsky's 'zones of proximate development', but the immediate resonance is the 'temporary autonomous zones' of Hakim Bey (unfairly vilified). It's hard to see what is really added to a TAZ except the *frisson* of 'proletarian': what's described is equally general, unrooted in any determinate social milieu. It's all very well to list the 'good' aspects of anti-capitalist protests the unpredictability, the mutual exchange of ideas, the lack of hierarchy but to what end? This kind of politics always reduces to a list of desirable adjectives. It's unable to explain either why people do things or what we *should* do. When the National Front announced it was going to trash a pub in Somers Town because the IRA once met there, the local left and Irish defended the pub. The Reclaim the Streets meeting advertised there that night 'relocated to Hampstead'. No doubt they were 'fluid/nomadic' and we were 'rigid/sedentary', but for me keeping the fascists out of my locality was more important than postmodern style options (or should that be 'ethics'?). Like Hakim Bey's TAZs, Shah-Shuja's 'zones' feel like leisure spaces, they lack political urgency. We haven't yet encountered Hegel's dialectical *Aufhebung* of Kant's antinomy between freedom and necessity (the dialectical *Aufhebung* behind the Communist Manifesto).

Marxism has long wrestled with the paradox of hatching a philosophy devoted to changing the world rather than describing it. The institution of the party was designed to mediate between theory and practice. Shah-Shuja will have none of the party. Despite the fact that this anti-Leninism is political prejudice, devoid of any investigation into Russian history, Shah-Shuja's reaction to party members and literature is far from unique. Anarchists, liberals and conservatives all say the same thing: the revolutionary left are robots, they cannot think for themselves. In defence, individual paper-sellers may not carry a brilliant response to every criticism wherever they go. However, a party has systems for the discussion of ideas, and positions are worked out through discussion and debate. You can find a more or less intelligent answer to most questions once you follow the paper trail. Shah-Shuja's situationist-style loathing for the organised left has something drunk about it: a regressive tantrum that I am not the centre of the world you're talking about.

This is not to say that a left discourse which leaves people alienated is sufficient. Far from it. The need to reorient subjectivity in a system which denies it is pressing and real. Alcohol would not be such an effective and necessary drug if it didn't address pertinent social tensions. To tackle such issues, thought would need to rise above Activity Theory to the heights of Adorno or Debord i.e. burst the bounds of Social Studies and show how philosophical issues are concrete. The mind/body problem is not an issue in philosophy, it's what we're all having to live through right now! Capitalist commerce and media have no room for the development of individual subjectivity, reducing us to consumers measured in spending power. The proliferation of specialised niche markets down to the 'everyone their own *Hello* magazine' of myspace has not diminished the motivic thrust of the operation: the accumulation of abstract social power, or money. This produces alienation and misery, miraculously

cured by the infantilism induced by alcohol. The drunk is suddenly the centre of the world again, just like a baby in its mother's arms. The problem with attaining this state through alcohol is that the drunk has difficulties engaging with anyone else's rational practice, demanding instead physical and sexual contact. Since mental health is dependent on a continuous and subtle interplay between the registers of mind and body (sexual advances by a drunk are an insult to the higher faculties, even if the drunk is desired), drink is a solution which creates problems rather than results. Nevertheless, it articulates a longing for centredness and de-alienation which cannot be wished away without changing social relations. The moralisers can repeat their injunctions until their tongues rot in their mouths, but the question of drink is social, not individual. The routine rationalism of commodity capitalism denies a necessity for our species being: a social mediation between the realms of dream and consciousness. Addressing this is the task of revolutionary art (that this mediation is increasingly addressed by religion is one of the grotesque features of our times).

Given the way academia has Balkanised knowledge, the lessons of Adorno and Debord are everywhere unlearned. Speaking about capitalism and alcohol in the same breath is beyond academic capability. Can Shah-Shuja do it? Unfortunately, the realm of art where subjectivity is defined according to objective works which may be scientifically scrutinised is not accessible from the world of Social Studies this book is aimed at, for whom a subject is already a social agent. Marx saw proletarian revolution as the solution to this object/subject split. The problem with Shah-Shuja's attack on moribund left organisation (of which there is plenty; take your pick ...), is that it doesn't mobilise this central idea, but instead provides a list of 'shoulds' about communication. As John Michael Roberts pointed out in his review in *Radical Philosophy* (#153), to damn workers' parties and trade unions as 'reactionary' and then use Lave and Wenger's notion of 'communities of practice' brings us on to the terrain of management theory, not revolution. Shah-Shuja's injunctions about democracy are reminiscent of the educational programmes designed by consultants for Camden Council, where young people are brought together to 'express themselves', and wind up making pop videos telling us that the key to life is to remain drug-free and not drop litter.

Vygotsky was of course correct to see revolutionary theory as a product of people coming together to make revolution. But I don't see how excluding those who've thought about it most (the party people) is going to improve the level of discussion. My own experience of the European Social Forum (according to Shah-Shuja, a bourgeois charade orchestrated by the hideous SWP) was of tepid circles of bleating liberals bemoaning their lot, with any revolutionary fires long ago doused. If anyone cited Marx or Lenin, it was as if booze had been smuggled into an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Indeed, it was an object-lesson in how the 'openness' Shah-Shuja calls for dissipates proletarian consciousness.

When Shah-Shuja 'theorises' Iranian football riots with a Bakhtinian 'celebration' of the repressed body, the reprise of a hoary cult-studs theme is the opposite of riotous. It reads like the work of a slightly dim but hardworking student with aspirations for tenure, not revolution. Likewise the paean to pirates at the end; fashions look so tawdry in retrospect: Linebaugh, Westwood, Acker, Depp, oh dear. Of course, there are many inspiring left writers who rely on academia to pay the bills, but they also need independence of mind and a dialectical relationship with their subject. The Iranian football rioters are never going to hear what Shah-Shuja says about them, they are there as an exotic citation of virtue for pious citation by Activity Theory pundits. Shah-Shuja believes in 'dialogue' but there's

none happening here: at least when Alex Callinicos says what he thinks about the last TUC Conference in *Socialist Worker* he knows that informed trade-unionists are going to read him. The party disciplines intellectuals, and that is a *good* thing from a proletarian point of view.

Shah-Shuja's inspiration for the book was two brief analyses of the May Day riots issued by a group calling itself the Melancholic Troglodytes. These are both funny and incisive. They are reproduced in appendices and have precisely the urgency of address which the main text lacks. It is not so much Shah-Shuja's academic pretensions that are at fault, but the uncritical way sources are cited. Marxist polemic puts all writing before the tribunal of life-as-lived; this kind of writing displays its reading as if all texts are solid gold. This positivism is abetted by use of the Harvard method for references, which has Humanities authors referring to published texts in the way scientists reference the results of experiments: by author and date (the full reference appears in the bibliography at the end of the volume). Empirical science works in a completely different way to social theory. When I say 'Crystals form in the third layer (Thompson, 1998)' I am referencing an empirical result produced under laboratory conditions, one of the building blocks of scientific knowledge. When I say 'gestures help create a sense of shared social, symbolic, physical, and mental space (McCafferty, 2002)', I am probably citing a piece of dubious, pompous gibberish in order to obtain a tick in the margin from someone who has also wasted their life reading dubious, pompous gibberish. The terms are so open and depend so much on the individual author's line of argument that the citation itself cannot bear sceptical scrutiny. Of course, entire disciplines have been made out of this kind of pseudo-science, where the uncritical piling up of references in refereed journals is 'scholarship', but it's not a game for anyone claiming to be a revolutionary. Shah-Shuja, how could you?

This academic tone is mildly offset by photographs with speech bubbles which appear situationist, but which are usually silly rather than cutting, allowing Shah-Shuja's political prejudices full rein. Low dots per inch resolution means some of the text in these are indecipherable. Further annoyances: Globalize Resistance is excoriated for 'leading' May Day 2001 into the siege of Oxford Street (p. 69), while the much-praised Melancholic Troglodytes argue that there was no other option (p. 318); 'counter-revolutionary Leninists' like Raya Dunayevskaya and John Parrington are cited positively (p. 173, p. 167) without remarking on the contradiction. For political reasons, Shah-Shuja's intellectual debts can't be admitted. 'Dialogue' is the great cry but there is no dialogue with other revolutionaries, they're all bastards, the left wing of capital. Written to impress social theory academics rather than activists, the book accepts anti-revolutionary principles at the level of expression and format.

Shah-Shuja does say at the beginning that the stand-off between Leninism and anarchism is not 'black and white', but the bile directed at the organised left becomes hysterical and silly. As with racism, one feels such paranoia must stem from a complete lack of contact with the hated object. It does, however, articulate the horror of the lonely bohemian intellectual for organisations which freeze thought long enough for non-intellectuals to join them. The intellectual can only see the arrest of his/her life activity; but for the trade unionist or activist, that is where life might start a clear aim in view, something to act on. All these disputes, intellectual versus worker, spontaneity versus organisation, subject versus object, are really regression from a total criticism of capitalism to a squabble between character types. To solve this, we need to recall the writings of one of Marx's inspirations, Charles Fourier. Charles Fourier envisaged socialism as the full indulgence of specific proclivities. He bitterly

mocked and satirised social programmes, Christian or 'ethical', based upon denying human nature. He devised systems of social interaction ('phalanxes') in which the different types of humanity could fulfill their desires in ways that did not come into conflict with the desires of other human types, but could work with them. Gossips should read the news, anal retentives design postage stamps, foot fetishists work in shoe shops (I love this idea, it's so unPC). An image for this kind of cooperation might be the relationship of the animal to the plant world, where the 'waste' product of one realm of living beings provides the necessary environment for the other realm (we depend upon the oxygen given off by plant photosynthesis; plants thrive on minerals provided by animal faeces). Anyone who has been involved in revolutionary moments of political endeavour, where propagandistic 'politics' breaks into a substantive attack on capitalist relations, will tell you about marvellous moments where 'each according to their means' suddenly makes sense: where the ability to use a word processor, engage in fisticuffs, play a guitar or drive a bulldozer suddenly becomes something to unite us rather than set us apart. By denying the role of the party ('the memory of the class'), Shah-Shuja denies knowledge, scholarship and publication a place in the spectrum of revolutionary endeavour. In its turn, revolutionary ardour becomes a priceless thing-in-itself (rather like animal species in radical animal liberation theory): something to be protected and praised, but not argued with by the researcher. Shah-Shuja is all for 'dialogue', but has no way of setting up a dialogue between intellectuals and protestors. Instead we hear calls for 'sensitivity' (p. 84. p. 87, p. 300).

Where is the man who will stand up and say 'let's NOT save the children'? Sensitivity, spontaneity, freedom are all such good things. Obviously. But how do we foment these desirable attributes? How do we get out of here, where capitalist interests and motives appear to proceed unchecked? Couldn't 'totally revolutionary' critique of day-to-day socialist activism and organisation be ideal camouflage for conformism and careerism within a repellent system? The guy who proclaims situationist hatred for left parties and trade unions, writes for *Adbusters* and then winds up organising a conference on 'guerilla tactics' for publicising clothing brands? One wishes the whole of *Zones of Proletarian Development* had been written by Melancholic Troglodytes, i.e. with the satirical freedom and venom which comes from being a Marxist intellectual with no comrades to offend. Such was Trotsky before 1917. In 1917, he appreciated the work Lenin had done in building a party that could prevent Kornilov's counter-revolution, (which would have perpetrated a bloodbath on a Nazi scale), from joining and helping to lead the Bolsheviks. One wonders if Shah-Shuja could be that 'flexible'? The prospect of a Department of Anti-Capitalist Activity Theory headed by Shah-Shuja, with undergraduates repeating *ZPD formulae* without having to test its ideas in practice (one stupidity avoided by the despised party form), is uninspiring compared to the fact that minds as witty and anti-authoritarian as the Melancholic Troglodytes can still find issues to write about in the twenty-first century: an oasis of intelligence and revolutionary wit in a movement drowning in whole-world NGO-reformist moralism. And we should also celebrate the fact that an aspirant academic should dare to base a book on two of their leaflets.

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Info

Mastaneh Shah-Shuja, *Zones of Proletarian Development*, OpenMute, 2008