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GALLIPOLI TO PETROV

Arguing with Australian History

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None dare call it conspiracy

SIR John Kerr's dismissal of the Whitlam ministry so outraged Labor supporters that they could not believe that Sir John had merely fulfilled his constitutional obligations. An enormous variety of explanations circulated, ranging from a few Trotskyites who suggested that Kerr was himself still a Trot and had sacked Whitlam in order to bring parliamentary democracy into disrepute, to stories about Kerr being blackmailed into the deed—on grounds of either sexual or legal impropriety. Alternatively, Kerr had moved to forestall a military coup against Whitlam. A leading state Labor politician believes that Kerr consulted the chiefs of staff, after 11 November, on the possibility of calling the election off and declaring a state of emergency. Not to be outdone, *Nation Review* gave a two-page spread to the 'Bilderberg Club', that standby of those who see the world in the grip of Jewish financiers. Undoubtedly, the explanation which gained most coverage gravitated around Kerr's links with intelligence and right-wing organisations (see Appendix A).

Rumour-mongering was not confined to the Labor side. Liberals convinced themselves that Whitlam, Cairns and Connor were lining up for a share of a reported $30 million commission from the loans deal. By October 1975, people who had voted Labor in 1972 and 1974 were convinced that Whitlam was planning a personal dictatorship and that he had already nominated a five-person committee of public safety.[1]

The role of rumour has not received serious attention in analyses of Australian political life. The difficulty of sources could be partly overcome by scrutinising the country press, *Truth*, *Nation Review*, the Canberra-based private newsletters and the political gossip columns. Attention should also be paid to the deliberate manufacture and spread of rumours against individual candidates and party leaders. Graffiti might

yet come into its own as a scholarly pursuit, Ian Turner notwithstanding.[2]

The generally bewildered scholarly response to Kerr's dismissal of Whitlam warrants discussion of certain theoretical and methodological questions regarding the nature of political action. It is not surprising that, confronted by Kerr's action, mainstream academics have produced nothing more than a jumble of anecdote, psephology, placital niceties and personal prejudice, since these are the stuff of political science.[3] What is more interesting is the failure of some self-proclaimed 'Marxists' to do any better. In suggesting some reasons for their failure, this article will traverse the role of conspiracies in a Marxist analysis of the practices of class domination.

During the past decade, 'Marxism' has attained a previously unheard of status in Western academic life, largely because modern revisionism detached Marxism from the organised proletariat at a time when conventional analyses were obviously irrelevant to a social system that was coming apart at the seams. This meant that 'Marxism' could become intellectually respectable—providing it appeared sophisticated enough to give a gloss to endless theses. Within this academic 'Marxism', the central question of how capitalists stay on top of the workers was dealt with by two opposing streams. In the late 1960s, the emphasis was on ideological constraints, popularised by Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, and given a more esoteric treatment in the renewed interest shown in the writings of George Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci. According to this stream, the capitalists were secure because the workers had absorbed bourgeois thinking and never even thought about overthrowing capitalism. In this schema the direct intervention of the state was largely unnecessary: violent repression had been replaced by hegemony, or by repressive tolerance. Talk of conspiracies was a laughable misreading of how powerful the bourgeoisie had become.

After the 1968 May days in France, a second stream surfaced in Anglo-Saxon 'Marxism'. It derived from the French philosopher, Louis Althusser, and its major theoretician of power was Nicos Poulantzas. In this interpretation, the role of the state was resuscitated. Indeed, state apparatuses acquired dimensions previously unrecognised in Marxist analysis; for example, it was argued that the state organised ideology and political parties. Conspiracies were even further removed from Poulantzasian concepts, if only because everything was structurally determined. Consequently, Poulantzas correctly castigated Ralph Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society* for its pre-scientific generalisations which located

class power in the effects of that power—e.g. in the old school tie—rather than in the real causes of educational inequalities, namely, the social relations of production.[4]

Whether the exposition of class power was in terms of 'hegemony' or of 'determinant structures', there was no theoretical space for the conscious intervention of the human will to maintain capitalism. To suggest that there were conspiracies revealed an infantile disorder.

To appreciate the thrust of these recent 'Marxisms', it is important to remember that they were produced by philosophers, in various senses of that term. Gramsci, Lukacs, Althusser and Poulantzas all researched widely and pointedly, but not in archives. In this they were different from the mainstream of academic Anglo-Saxon 'Marxism' which has been driven forward principally by historians and economists, that is by people immediately concerned with empirical research. Because the philosophers did not have any empirical material at hand, they have sometimes turned empirical questions into theoretical ones. Hegemony became the equivalent of the ether in which light was supposed to travel; by concentrating on the consumption of ideology by the subordinate classes, it lost touch with the need for ideological production as a real practice. Poulantzas, on the other hand, turned perfectly ordinary questions into theoretical problems; translated French history into laws of capitalist development; and was then obliged to invent neologisms to get him out of the muddle he had made. In their quite proper desire to produce the concepts which we need to turn bits of information into facts, Poulantzas and his epigones left no space for lived experience. Despite their lip service to concrete investigations, they confused the inescapable necessity for empirical research with the fallacy of empiricism. And although they correctly conceived people as the bearers of structures, their non-empirical style meant that the structures were prefabricated and the people were helped to carry their loads by being buried knee-deep in reinforced concrete.[5]

What is the status of conspiracy? First, capitalist power is not based on some vast, over-arching conspiracy in the manner set down in the protocols of Zion, or as suggested by a Bilderberg club. Poulantzas is perfectly right to locate capitalist power in state apparatuses determined by the social relations of production. And ideological hegemony—correctly conceived—plays its role. But we must not throw the bath water out with the baby for, although capitalist power is not one gigantic conspiracy, conspiracies can and do happen, and have been convincingly shown to have happened.

In his account of the 1931 transfer to Joe Lyons from the ALP to the leadership of the United Australia Party, Phillip Hart has conclusively demonstrated what must be described as a conspiracy if the English language is to retain meaning. Six men arranged who was to be prime minister. Of course, they were not just any six men, and for their decision to be decisive they needed other instruments of capitalist power—the press and the financial backers of the old National Party. Yet someone had to bring Joe Lyons, Keith Murdoch and Robert Knox together, and that is precisely what the group of six 'breathed together' to achieve.[6]

The Lyons example is somewhat unusual because it depended so little on state apparatuses for its execution. The Zinoviev letter case is possibly more typical in this respect. In 1924, Comintern leader Zinoviev is supposed to have instructed the British Communist Party to stir up mutinies in the British army and navy. A copy of his letter was published in *The Times* as authentic, and it has been erroneously blamed for the defeat of the British Labour government at the 1924 elections. Even if we assume that the letter was genuine, what is really significant is how it came to be accepted officially as such. The Conservative Party central office, *The Times* (and the *Daily Mail*), various intelligence agencies and the Foreign Office fed each other's suspicions and edged each other towards endorsing the letter's authenticity. In other words, state apparatuses, often acting unknown to each other, *produced* 'the Zinoviev letter' out of a letter from Zinoviev. They did this by going about their normal, cautious, rational and muddling functions as state apparatuses. The disparate, contradictory and unintentioned acts of Zinoviev, possible White Russian forgers, and various independent agencies acquired coherence through the capitalist state.[7]

Written evidence of conspiracies is rare, sometimes destroyed, and almost invariably takes decades to surface. The most recent researcher into the Zinoviev letter case acknowledges that, 'in the absence of the original text and the complete dossier of secret service files, there can be no documentary proof of its genuine character today. Since the essence of the Secret Service is, as Austen Chamberlain observed, that it is secret, its papers are not preserved for later public inspection, nor are they handed over in toto to other departments.[8]

Instances as different as the Lyons and Zinoviev cases are the spectacular tips of the iceberg of how capitalist power operates. The daily practices of class dominance are nicely illustrated through an examination of the 1920 volume of the diary of the managing director of BHP, G. D. Delprat.[9] Because the diary was really only an appointment

book, it is occasionally necessary to construe from wider reading what was going on, although there is no need to invent anything.

> 18 February: Called on Inspector General Mitchell in connection with B Hill police. Promised to give one of his detectives work at Electric shop.
> 15 May: Dined at Melbourne Club with The Chief Justice (Knox) Judge Stark Judge Cussen Judge Duffy General White Admiral Grant.
> 2 October: Taken silver plate out of the safe deposit for Tuesday's dinner.
> 4 October: Invited Chief Justice and Stark to dinner, next day—they accepted. Meeting of mines committee—about Broken Hill.
> 5 October: In evening gave dinner party at my house . . . Guests [lists four BHP Directors] and Rt Hon Chief Justice Knox and Mr Justice Stark.
> 22 November: Monteath and Payne came to see about cutting off supplies from Firms not keeping compact.
> 18 December: High Court Decision—(in our favour).
> 20 December: Left with 7.10 train for Melbourne. Chat with . . . Sir Robert Garran [Solicitor General].
> 22 December: Met Sir Robert Garran at this office by appointment. Explained in connection with Hobbles tribunal—Advised find out if Edmunds would give a statement that coke workers cannot belong to Coal and Shale Workers Union.

Here are nine entries covering a year, and what do we find? First, the managing director of BHP arranges for a policeman to be placed in his firm; has dinner twice with leading judges while BHP has a case before the Full High Court—a case which it wins;[10] is involved in a restrictive trade practice against firms which negotiate separately with unions; gets advice on how to proceed in an industrial dispute from the Commonwealth Solicitor General whom he had bumped into two days before on a train. Here we see the daily functioning of capitalist domination which is not a matter of conspiracies, although there is need for organisation. It is rather that their paths and ideas cross naturally, so that when they meet they do not conspire, they merely go about their normal business of running the country.

It is a tribute to the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie, organised through universities, that while almost every scholar accepts that a working class has to organise itself on a daily basis, similar suggestions about the bourgeoisie are looked down on as pitiably simplistic. Perhaps the main function of cover-all conspiracies, like the protocols and Bilderberg, has been to undermine the credibility of concepts of dominant class organisation.

Regular, identifiable and specific organisation is essential to class dominance, so that capitalist power has to be organised every hour of every day—in factories and schools as well as in homes and on the streets. If conspiracy is eliminated from the Marxist lexicon, it must be to let the pervasive reality of dominant class organisation be recognised in the hardest sense possible. Conspiracies are not a special case of this organisation; on the contrary, they attempt what the normal functioning of state apparatuses cannot achieve—either at all, or as effectively, or as speedily. Conspiracies occur when ruling in the old way becomes difficult, and when fractions in the dominant class move against each other. Conspiracies are marked by the deliberate intention ('breathing together') of their actors, because they lack the full cohesive power which is provided unintentionally when working through state apparatuses.

The distinction could be illustrated in an analysis of the Petrov affair, when normal dominant class organisation developed conspiratorial elements. Petrov's defection was organisation; *some* of what Menzies did with the defection was conspiracy. A conspiracy was needed in order to upset the functioning of state apparatuses to prevent Labor taking office, and eventuality which the state apparatuses were well able to absorb; after all, the Labor party is part of those apparatuses. To disrupt this normal operation of state power required deliberate intention on the part of the ruling strata around Menzies. When a dominant class faces new and difficult problems, or when its fractions realign, conspiracies occur as part of the scramble between the various strata available to rule on behalf of the dominant class. Without determinant social relations of production, and state apparatuses, conspiracies would come unstuck, and organisation would be pointless.

Appendix A

Canberra Times 17 July 1975.

Speculation on Sir John Kerr

Sir,—Your editorial (4 July) softening up for a gubernatorial coup feeds speculation about the present Governor-General of Australia. Suspicion arises partly because of his past, partly because of the unusual nature of his appointment, and partly because that appointment has in no way lessened his longstanding special interest in political and international events.

Sir John Kerr's political career started with his membership and eventual leadership of the Civil Affairs Unit, Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs, during the first Pacific war. In the early 1950s, he worked as counsel for Industrial Group officials in the trade union movement. His role in developing a 'secure' legal system for Papua-New Guinea is also well documented.

His appointment was puzzling. For the first time since 1920, Australia has a Governor-General who is neither a has-been nor a remittance man. Why should a man in the fullness of his powers accept such a titular position when he could serve his class in so many other ways?

Finally, the vice-regal notices in your columns repay scrutiny. For example, on 20 September 1974, Sir John Kerr entertained Gordon Jockell, Director of the Joint Intelligence Organisation; W. B. Prichett, first assistant secretary, Defence Planning; Mr Peter Hastings, Research Fellow in the Strategic Studies Centre at the Australian National University; and Professor Beddie, from the Political Science Department, Duntroon.

Any judicial inquiry into recent political events will be incomplete if it assumes that the career prospects of intelligence agents are in any way limited.

Humphry McQueen
Griffith
[1976]

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Middle-class politics

1 John Rickard *Class and Politics, New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth 1890–1910* Canberra: ANU Press, 1976.
2 E. P. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* Penguin, 1968, p. 9.
3 'Bourgeoisie' is more accurate than 'capitalists' since 'bourgeoisie' includes the strata of non-owners who help to make the expropriation of surplus value possible.
4 Although the slave and feudal modes were confined to outback stations and missions their existence underlines the need to work from real economic relationships and not to be blinded by juridical forms.
5 Some published examples of capital history include the chapters by Collins and Dunn in volume one of Wheelwright and Buckley (eds) *Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*; Rowse in *Arena* 44–45; as well as articles by Rowley and Cochrane in *Intervention*, 1 and 6 respectively. Of course, there are other, much earlier examples of capital history, such as D. W. A. Baker's 'Orginis of Robertson's Land Acts', *Historical Studies* May 1958.

NSW Labor

1 Nairn's supra-historical view of capitalism is all the more significant since one of his complaints against Marxist theorisers had been that we 'implicitly assume that all nations and all societies are the same' (p. 63). Nairn made this statement even though the May 1970 issue of *Labour History* had carried Terry Irving's review of J. Kuczynski's *The Rise of the Working-Class* which pointed out the special position accorded to Australian capitalism by that work (p. 87).

21 None dare call it conspiracy

1 These paragraphs are based on personal conversations, correspondence and reading.
2 G. Lefebre *The Great Fear* London: New Left Books, 1973, provides an example from France in 1789.
3 This is very evident in the reaction to Donald Horne's *Death of the Lucky Country* Ringwood: Penguin, 1976, which bears all the vices and virtues of these features. His colleagues' outrage is partly that of Caliban, and partly because Horne proclaims what pluralism is at such pains to conceal: that parliamentary democracy is a stacked deck. See my review 'In the Country of the Blind' *Nation Review* 27 February 1976, pp. 500–1.
4 See the interchange between Miliband and Poulantzas *New Left Review* 58, Nov.–Dec. 1969, pp. 67–78; 59 Jan.–Feb. 1970, pp. 53–60; 82, Nov.–Dec. 1973, pp. 83–92.
5 J. Barbalet, 'Political Science, the State and Marx' *Politics* 9, 1 May 1974 pp. 69–73, provides a sound critical introduction to the strengths and weaknesses of Poulantzas' major work, *Political Power and Social Classes* London: New Left Books and Sheed and Ward, 1973.
6 P. Hart 'Lyons: Labor Minister—Leader of the U.A.P.' *Labour History* 17, Nov. 1969, pp. 37–51.
7 For a useful journalists' account see L. Chester *et al. The Zinoviev Letter* London: Heinemann, 1967.
8 S. Crewe 'The Zinoviev Letter: A Reappraisal' *Journal of Contemporary History* 10, 3, July 1975, pp. 407–32.
9 Delprat Papers, NLA, MS 1630/15.
10 The decision was in two parts. The bench was unanimous on the first and evenly divided on the second. The three judges with whom Delprat had dined—Knox, Starke and Duffy—decided in favour of BHP. 28 *CLR* pp. 456–94.