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Obituary

Neil Faulkner - Charismatic Revolutionary

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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He was a brilliant speaker and writer, with an amazing ability to explain the theories of Marxism, to inspire people, young and old, in the struggle for socialism, and to de-mystify what the ruling class tell us about history and contemporary society. Neil had enormous energy and determination, a fantastic work rate, great personal warmth and humour and a total commitment both to his family and the struggle for socialism. That warmth and humour informed his speeches and his conversation; he could be equally spellbinding when addressing left wing meetings, explaining Marxism to young people fresh to radical ideas or acting as a guide for rich tourists.

In short, he had extraordinary charisma. But more than that, in the last six years of his life, Neil was embarked on an odyssey to understand and explain the crisis of our time which threatens the very existence of humanity, a theoretical journey he undertook with comrades in Anti*Capitalist Resistance, and with others, especially [William I Robinson](#) in the United States.

Neil came into politics at Cambridge University during the late 1970s, through the Anti-Nazi League – and hence into the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). He worked for Anti-Apartheid from 1980-82, then he spent a year in Sudan teaching English in a boys' school, and after became a school teacher for nearly a decade in the UK. After that he became a professional historian and archaeologist, from 1996 spending weeks every summer at the [Sedgeford dig](#) in Norfolk, as well as escorting groups of mainly well-heeled tourists on tours of archaeological sites in the Mediterranean, Eastern Europe and sometimes Russia.

He wrote a series of books starting with [The Decline and Fall of Roman Britain](#) in 2000, and including [Empire of the Eagles](#) (on Rome), [Apocalypse](#) (on the Jewish uprising against the Roman Empire), [Lawrence of Arabia's Wars](#) and [Empire and Jihad](#), about the Anglo-Arab wars of the 50 years after 1870. Wearing his archaeologist hat he made appearances on Channel 4's Time Team and the BBC's Timewatch, as well as making a number of appearances on BBC radio.

Neil spoke at lectures all around the country, and at the SWP's summer Marxism events. Here he caused some controversy with his iconoclastic ideas about Rome – he contradicted Marxist orthodoxy that the Roman Empire was an example of the 'slave mode of production.' On the contrary, he argued, what kept Rome going was 'robbery with violence', extremely brutal conquests which resulted in vast quantities of booty, including slaves, as well as colonies which supplied many of Rome's material needs.

All the time Neil sought, in the best Marxist tradition, to explain and chart new theories, not just to describe. For example, his work about Sedgeford led him last summer to conclude that Saxon feudalism emerged autonomously in East Anglia, as early as the seventh century, a really original theory.

Neil developed a specialism in military history, editing Military History Matters magazine. This enabled him to intervene on military matters and war, for example the 100th anniversary of the first Battle of the Somme in 2016. He ambushed right wing military historian Max Hastings on Radio 4, manoeuvring him into accepting that all the main participants in the First World War were imperialist powers. I saw him speak at a meeting in Hampstead, where the programme of poems and songs from the trenches was interspersed by short Marxist explanations from Neil – "What ended the First World War? Revolution across Europe!"

In stark contrast to government celebrations of the centenary marking the end of the First World War Neil wrote a

hard-hitting expose, [No Glory, the Real History of the First World War](#), published by the Stop the War Coalition. In it he argued that World War One was a military disaster and a human catastrophe, a war driven by the imperial powers' competition for wealth and power around the globe.

Neil visited some of the sites of [famous WW1 battles](#). He explored Loos, where his grandfather fought with the Civil Service Rifles, and also High Wood on the Somme, where his grandfather was wounded (living with shrapnel inside him for the rest of his life). Neil also went to Gallipoli and saw his great uncle's name inscribed there. He said, 'It is all very moving. There is nothing like it for underlining the futility and injustice of imperialist war.'

Neil left the SWP with the split that created Counterfire, but after a few years he developed differences over perspectives and especially over internal democracy and left the organisation. In 2014-15 he was the driving force behind the [Brick Lane debates](#), a series of meetings held at Vibe bar and other social centres in the lane. Hundreds came to debate climate change, the housing crisis, fashion and a clutch of topics precisely aimed at young people. This is what inspired and energised Neil – being able to explain Marxism as applied to the contemporary crisis, to young people. But the Brick Lane debates eventually died away in 2015 because they couldn't adequately answer the question they posed – what was to be done, from a campaigning and organisational viewpoint, about the crisis?

Neil by this time had become absolutely convinced that the existing far left organisations were finished. I had numerous discussions with him on this topic, and he changed his view only slightly, in relation to [Socialist Resistance](#). Right at the end of his life he said, 'I remain in the tradition of [Tony Cliff](#) and socialism from below, but I have been greatly influenced by the tradition of the [Fourth International](#).'

What convinced him most about the existing far Left's inability to interpret the modern world was the debate over Brexit. The majority of the Left supported Brexit and Neil was appalled. He thought it self-evident that the Brexit campaign, led by right-wing Tories and Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, was the key instrument for building support for nationalism and the hard right. He saw Brexit as absolutely in line with Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini's Lega party in Italy, the Alliance for Germany and the Austrian Freedom Party.

Opposition to Brexit strengthened his convergence with Left Unity and Socialist Resistance. He was alarmed by the complacent attitude to the rise of the far right in much of the Left and its underestimation of the extent to which the far right of existing capitalist parties could act as the mechanism for modern fascism. 'Fascists in suits' became Neil's mantra.

The second, and more substantial edition of [Creeping Fascism](#), was launched at the No Passaran conference in March 2017, where Neil made an exceptionally blunt exposition of his theory, which caused a lot of controversy. But the actions of the Trump administration in the United States, the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil and the growing strength of far right parties in France and Italy were strong evidence for the creeping fascism idea. At any rate, the idea that modern fascism will not come with jackboots and swastikas, but will try to come to power through elections, and utilise the apparatus of the capitalist state to secure power, seems increasingly obvious. And the tumultuous events of [January 6 2021](#) in Washington where Trump incited a crowd of fascists and other far rightists to attack the Capitol building, seemed like confirmation of the idea of an [interaction between the fascists and the hard right of the capitalist parties](#).

A small group of people around Neil formed Mutiny to take these ideas to young people, but it became clear that you couldn't put a cigarette paper between Mutiny and Socialist Resistance, and the process of unification was begun that formed Anti*Capitalist Resistance.

Neil was among the [most sceptical](#) in Anti*Capitalist Resistance about work in the Labour Party. But the key thing for

him was increasingly the theoretical effort to understand the present crisis. He made contact with the American Marxist William I Robinson, whose work on the thesis of the Global Police State increasingly influenced Neil.

He now embarked on an attempt to explain the modern crisis as the accumulation and growing integration of, a number of crushing contradictions from which modern capitalism seemed incapable of escaping and which threatened to bring about societal collapse – [unless revolution intervened to prevent it](#).

At the centre of everything was the notion of the '[dual metabolic rift](#)', which Neil borrowed from the radical American scientist [Rob Wallace](#). [The environmental crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic](#) could not be understood as separate processes, but both involved modern capitalist farming and agri-business which had disrupted the natural barriers between the pathogens of the forest and human civilisation. At the same time capitalist farming, in particular the massive feed stations for cattle and pigs, was a major contributor to global heating and environmental degradation.

Neil thought that modern capitalism had rendered some of Marx's writings about [surplus creation and accumulation](#) outdated. In particular in articles written with me, he insisted on the strengthening of 'accumulation at the point of consumption.' Drawing on the work of Guy Debord, he argued this, in turn, had created a form of capitalism in which there was a split between mass immiseration of the excluded and huge consumption of consumer goods by better off sections of the working class and the petit bourgeoisie. This generated [a vast capitalist 'spectacle'](#), an alienated system in which the reality of exploitation was obscured with a vast system of images, creating a dream world, often in the form of celebrity culture.

Neil wrestled with the contradictions of capitalist globalisation, in which capital seemed to become 'de-nationalised', eliminating nationally-based capitalism and inter-imperialist competition that goes with it. He soon recognised that the conflicts between China and the United States did not allow us to eliminate the concept of imperialism. The idea of the [Global Police State](#), rightly emphasising the escalating police repression and militarisation across the globe, should not allow us to dismiss imperialist competition between the major powers.

In the last year of his life Neil became increasingly focused on the social crisis and the [mass psychology of fascism](#), an investigation pioneered by William Reich, which has frequently enabled fascists and the radical right to become the beneficiaries of economic and social crisis. Neil wanted to write a book on this, but was also writing a book on the revolution and civil war in Spain (1936-39) and wanted to publish a collection of the military writings of [Tom Wintringham](#), a British Communist who fought in the Spanish Civil War.

Neil became a member of the steering committee of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, and of the website editorial board. He was excited by the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and he was present at the mass London demonstration in May 2020. He was also present when, in March 2021, [police attacked the Sarah Everard vigil in south London](#), which became a general protest against violence against women. In both he saw the seeds of a radicalisation of young people that could take on the system as a whole. As the storm clouds of fascism and the crisis darkened, he became increasingly impatient of all forms of reformism. He identified himself and our political tasks with a single word: revolutionary. Neil would only want one thing – that his comrades pick up the baton of revolutionary resistance, and continue his political and theoretical work.

The last time I talked to him I conveyed the information from Chinese comrades, that his book [A Radical History of the World](#), had been translated into Chinese and was being used as a semi-official textbook in some universities. 'That has really cheered me up', he said. He laughed uproariously at the fact that the chapter on contemporary China, which explains the evolution of bureaucratic capitalism, had been removed.

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