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Obituary

Peter Gowan - an appreciation

- IV Online magazine - 2009 - IV413 - June 2009 -

Publication date: Wednesday 17 June 2009

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[IMG/jpg/PeterGowan52a.jpg]

Peter Gowan

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Peter Gowan, Professor at London Metropolitan University, a member of the New Left Review editorial board and a former leader of the International Marxist Group (IMG), died on 12 June. He was probably the leading Marxist expert on international relations writing in English, and wrote and spoke with an astonishing grasp of the inter-relationship between economic, political and military power in the modern world. His ability to knit together theory with a vast range of factual knowledge held his audiences spellbound.

But he was far from a detached academic; he was an utterly partisan, determined and vitriolic critic of American imperialism. For him, the central obstacle to world progress and social justice were what he called the “Dollar-Wall St regime”. After 9/11 Peter was in demand around the world to explain why the US had gone to war and what the ‘axis of evil’ and ‘war on terror’ were all about. He claimed American imperialism had made a ‘Faustian bid’ for world dominance, and that military violence was central to that bid. He was also convinced that it could not succeed; that ultimately world domination was impossible by a single imperialist power and that the United States was ‘triumphing towards disaster’.

Peter Gowan joined the International Marxist Group (IMG) in 1968 and more or less immediately came into its central leadership. In 1969-70 he was central to the organisation’s youth work, particularly its intervention into the Revolutionary Socialist Students Federation. He worked closely with established IMG leaders like Pat Jordan and Ernest Tate; but also with two new recruits, Tariq Ali and John Weal, in the ‘united front’ far left newspaper *The Black Dwarf*, a journal particularly well adapted for the student and cultural revolution of the time. Peter was involved in the split in the paper’s editorial board, which saw the likes of Adrian Mitchell, Anthony Barnett and Fred Halliday assume control of the paper while the IMG-led majority produced in 1970 *The Red Mole*.

The first issue came out in the middle of the June 1970 wave of student sit-ins against the universities’ practice of keeping secret files on students and their deepening links with private business (1). IMG students were central to this protest in a number of universities including Warwick and York.

At the start of the new decade however the IMG was struggling to establish its identity and role as the anti-Vietnam war movement and student upsurge were giving way to an increasingly working class, union-centred, rebellion. A small organisation, with a weak leadership and few working class roots met its destiny in the form of a faction organised by John Ross in Oxford, which quickly pushed aside the old leadership. At first Peter, like Tariq Ali, was convinced by Ross’s blend of ‘turning to the working class’ and programmatic, propagandistic ultimatism, but by 1973 had broken with the Ross leadership to link up again with Pat Jordan, at first on the (self-evident) basis that the urgent need of working class struggle was to fight to kick out the Tories and not ‘centralise the struggle against the state’. Peter said that discussions with Pierre Rousset, a leader of the French Ligue Communiste, had been decisive in his reassessment of Ross’s passive propagandism.

Peter Gowan led more or less the same minority throughout the 1970s, as the IMG interpreted democratic rights in revolutionary organisations as meaning that having half a dozens internal factions was a virtue, rather than – if persisted in over a long period – a massively demoralising and destabilising factor.

By the early 1980s Peter was leading a faction that urged entry into the Labour Party, but was also moving towards

an academic career and deepening his interest in Eastern Europe. Around this time, at the 1982 conference, he refused to be on the national leadership again, and effectively drifted out of the organisation. This was also the period when Tariq Ali also left the IMG.

In this period the IMG was trying to put into a practice a hare-brained tactic devised by the American SWP, the so-called 'turn to industry' – sending young ex-students into anything that smacked of manual industry. Sections of the Ross leadership moved sharply to break up the organisation's growing base in white collar unions, and send white collar fraction leaderships to meet its conception of the 'proletariat' (often in un-unionised sweatshops) (2).

Backing this tactic was part of an attempted rapprochement by sections of the Fourth International leadership with the Jack Barnes-led leadership of the US SWP, who had built their own tendency in Britain. When Ernest Mandel appeared in front of the IMG central committee to explain he was supporting the 'turn to industry' because of his 'sincere convictions', Peter shocked him by denouncing 'this anti-Trotskyist turn'.

Peter also rejected the increasingly improbable notion that there was something 'anti-imperialist' in the leadership of the Iranian regime, insisting that a central part of the upsurge that threw out the Shah had been an urban-based reactionary mass movement, with nothing progressive about it ("as if we haven't seen reactionary mass movements challenge states before").

Being centrally involved in permanent factional mayhem and an organisation clearly going crazy was too much for Peter, just as much as for Tariq Ali.

Outside an organised far left group Peter's energies found three inter-related focuses. He had been a central the IMG's East European commission, that had worked with other sections of the FI to make links with, and give material aid to, Marxist and other radical dissidents in the eastern bloc. From the late 1970s Peter assembled a talented team around the journal *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*, designed to build broader support in the left and labour movements for anti-Stalinist activism and organisation in the Stalinist states. The magazine lifted the curtain on the then largely unknown developments in the eastern bloc and provided a platform for the emerging dissident movements. While other talented Marxists like Patrick Camiller, Sheila Malone, Andy Kilmister, Günther Minnerup and Gus Fagan worked on the magazine, it was around Peter Gowan's substantial interventions that the magazine developed its ideological position and analysis.

Second, Peter became a lecturer in European Studies at North London Polytechnic, later part of London Metropolitan University. This gave him the stimulus and motivation to develop an analysis of the European Union in the 1980s, and its relationship with the United States and an increasingly crisis-racked eastern bloc. Peter saw the EU as an undemocratic bosses' club, which took decision in the Council of Ministers and was deliberately designed to be outside democratic control of the European workers – a perspective now widespread in the European Left.

Third, Peter became a member of the *New Left Review* editorial board, working alongside other ex-IMG members like Robin Blackburn, Tariq Ali and (until the early 1990s) Quentin Hoare and Branka Magas. It was his repeated interventions in the NLR that made him well known world-wide amongst the radical intelligentsia and the Left. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc, and with the first Gulf War in 1991 his international focus rebalanced, giving more emphasis to explaining and charting American imperialism. He engaged in a deep study of the roots of US expansionism and was greatly influenced by the work of one of the foremost 'revisionist' US historians, Gabriel Kolko - whose main theorisation of the rise of US imperialism is set out in his *Main Currents of American History*.

Peter used *Labour Focus* to write a major piece opposing the US-led assault on Serbia, the so-called 'Kosovo

war', in 1999. He campaigned with crusading zeal against the 'humanitarian interventionism' espoused by many liberals and former leftists – and used as a cover by many for supporting the second Iraq war.

Peter's theory of the 'Dollar-Wall St regime' eventually led to the publication by Verso of 'Global Gamble – America's Faustian Bid for World Leadership' (1999). After 9/11 he was in his element, one week in Brazil, the next in the US, then in China. He waged his own intellectual jihad against the 'war on terror' and American imperial power. He was in his element again at the 2004 European Social Forum in London where, together with Perry Anderson, he clinically dissected and denounced US imperial power to an audience of hundreds of young people from across the continent.

There will doubtless be many memoirs of Peter from different perspectives. From the viewpoint of people he knew him from the early IMG years, it was perhaps a pity that the descent of that organisation into craziness prevented him from being a more long-term leader of a revolutionary organisation. In a bigger organisation with a broader political culture he could have been a long-term member of a broad leadership team. But that would have meant him living in another country, at another time, with another culture altogether.

But Peter did maintain links with the organised far left, particularly the International Socialist Group (later Socialist Resistance) and the Fourth International more generally. He strongly influenced the ISG's international politics; and he frequently spoke at meetings organised by FI supporters and their allies in the radical left.

As it was he became one of the most important Marxist intellectuals writing in the English language. His writing was invariably original, always sparkling with ideas and insights – as was his speaking. Peter was utterly charismatic and had an ability to inspire people and excite them with his creative Marxism. He oozed personal charm, a quality not over-abundant in the British far left. He was completely intransigent ideologically, and was unphased about telling anyone, no matter how rarified the company, that he was a Marxist and a Trotskyist.

Peter Gowan inspired hundreds of people in many countries with the ideas of Marxism, applied to the central questions of our time. It is awful that such a brilliant man has died in his early 60s.

Notes

1) Recounted in the Penguin book of the time, Edward Thompson's Warwick University Limited.

2) A tactic which reached its nadir in the 'Cowley Moles' saga, when MI5 and the British Leyland management caught the organisation sending more than a dozen young people into the Cowley (Oxford) car factory.

Phil Hearse 15/06/09

First published at [Marxsite](#)