

Radical journalist Alexander Cockburn, 1941-2012

By David Walsh
14 August 2012

Radical journalist Alexander Cockburn died July 21 at the age of 71. Cockburn, with a record of political activity dating back to the New Left and the anti-Vietnam War protest movement in Britain in the 1960s, had been co-editor of the *CounterPunch* political newsletter, along with Jeffrey St. Clair, since 1996.

The Oxford-educated Cockburn, who grew up in Ireland, emigrated to the US in 1973. He wrote for the *Village Voice* for a number of years, before moving on to the *Nation* in 1984, a post he maintained until his death. The *Wall Street Journal* ran a regular column by him from 1980 to 1990.

Tributes to the journalist following his death referred to him variously as an “iconoclast,” “gadfly” or “contrarian” of the left. Cockburn was undoubtedly possessed of the ability to turn a phrase, and he had a more sophisticated intellectual background than many of his American media contemporaries. If he stood out in any remarkable way, however, it was largely by default: after all, during his tenure the media as a whole and the “left” quasi-intelligentsia underwent an extraordinarily reactionary transformation, a feature of the lurch rightward by the entire establishment in the US.

Unlike his former associate at the *Nation*, Christopher Hitchens, Cockburn did not move ignominiously into the camp of the ultra-right. He remained more or less what he was, a radical critic of contemporary politics, to the end.

In 1996, this writer reviewed a volume of Cockburn’s articles, *The Golden Age Is In Us* (1995), for the *International Workers Bulletin*, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*. It is a measure of Cockburn’s limitations that one can reprint the review’s overall assessment of his work 16 years later, after the passage of many tumultuous events and the publication of hundreds more of the journalist’s pieces, without alteration:

“In the end, one is struck by the superficiality and shortsightedness of so many of his observations. While Cockburn’s politically risqué commentary may serve to spice up a variety of publications, it would not prove much help in deepening one’s grasp of more complex historical and social problems.”

Cockburn belonged to a certain generation and social milieu. The New Left, to which he gravitated in the late 1960s, eclectically and unseriously patched together infatuations with Maoism, guerrillism and anarchist “direct action” and half-digested bits and pieces of existentialism and the Frankfurt School (Marcuse, Adorno, etc.). Soundly rejected were a socialist orientation to the working class and a historical reckoning with the big questions of the 20th century, above all, the fate of the Russian Revolution and the nature of Stalinism.

For some student radicals of the time, such as Cockburn, the history and character of Stalinism cut too close to the bone. His father, Claud Cockburn, was a well known British journalist and member of the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s. During the Spanish Civil War, writing under the name Frank Pitcairn, the elder Cockburn penned

scurrilous articles slandering the centrist POUM (Workers Party of Marxist Unification) as an agency of German and Italian fascism. While not a Trotskyist party, the POUM retained its independence from the counterrevolutionary Spanish Stalinist party and Soviet apparatus; for this, it was denounced as Franco’s Fifth Column by Cockburn-Pitcairn and his Stalinist colleagues.

More than that, according to James Pettifer, the editor of a volume of Claud Cockburn’s writings on Spain, the latter “had formed a close personal relationship in Spain with Mikhail Koltsov, then the foreign editor of Pravda and at that time, in Cockburn’s view, ‘the confidant and mouthpiece and direct agent of Stalin in Spain.’”

Stalin, “at that time,” was supervising the infamous Moscow Trials—in which many of those who had led the Russian Revolution in 1917 were convicted of entirely fabricated and grotesque “counterrevolutionary” crimes and executed—and generally conducting a genocidal campaign against socialists in the USSR.

In Spain, the Stalinists were pursuing their Popular Front line, which meant the renunciation of social revolution, the subordination of the working class to liberal bourgeois and social democratic parties, and the defense of the nation-state and capitalist property relations, in the supposed name of combating fascism. To prevent the emergence of an independent workers movement (such as erupted in Barcelona in May 1937), the Stalinists and their GPU secret police in Spain hunted down and murdered opponents of the Kremlin’s policy.

Alexander Cockburn was not responsible for this filthy history, but he made clear throughout his career, including by his vituperative attacks on George Orwell (who exposed Pitcairn-Cockburn in *Homage to Catalonia*), his essential solidarity with his father’s Stalinism. This was not primarily a matter of filial piety. He shared the essential reformist-class collaborationist outlook of his father. For both, “left” and “progressive” politics necessarily developed within the framework of an alliance with the political representatives of the bourgeoisie. This was the real content of their hatred of Trotskyism.

In other words, as we noted in 1996, Cockburn carried with him an entire set of political assumptions—in fact, dirty secrets—about which his readers were largely kept ignorant.

Cockburn became associated with the *New Left Review* in the mid-1960s and the general milieu of British left intellectuals that included Perry Anderson (at one point, Cockburn’s roommate), Robin Blackburn (who co-wrote a book on the trade unions with Cockburn, published in 1967), Tariq Ali and others. These figures were primarily united by their adaptations to Stalinism-Maoism and bourgeois nationalism, and their determined hostility to genuine Trotskyism, represented at the time by the Socialist Labour League, then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

One of Cockburn’s first major efforts, after joining the *New Left Review* editorial board in 1965, was the editing of a volume of essays entitled *Student Power: Problems, Diagnosis, Action* (1969). The book includes

Cockburn's own introduction, as well as pieces by Anderson, Blackburn, Tom Nairn, Fred Halliday and others from Britain, Carl Davidson of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the US, an interview with Herbert Marcuse, and a document from a group of French students, among them Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

Student Power is primarily noteworthy as a compendium of anti-Marxist conceptions. Against those fighting to turn the radicalizing students toward the working class and toward principled questions of history in the late 1960s, Cockburn and his associates flattered the student movement and presented it as "the arrival of a new social force" (Cockburn, in his introduction).

Cockburn was quite explicit in his orientation, writing, "student power, often attacked as a limited and distorting phrase, still means what it says: the power of students to determine the structure and content of their education. Of course the eventual aim is the cementing of a revolutionary bloc with working class forces; but the immediate power of the student lies in his university, his college, where he works as a student." (Introduction)

Indeed, astonishing as it may seem, *Student Power* makes virtually no mention of the massive French general strike of 10 million workers that had shaken capitalist Europe to its roots the year before. The political and social interests of Cockburn and company lay elsewhere.

Bound up with that, although many of the essayists were members or supporters of the International Marxist Group, the organization affiliated with Ernest Mandel's United Secretariat, or the state-capitalist International Socialist tendency (a fact concealed from the reader), both of which claimed to belong to the "Trotskyist tradition," Trotsky's political heritage is never mentioned.

At a time when serious historians and scholars, even those who opposed Trotsky's perspective, were obliged to pay tribute to his extraordinary intellectual abilities, the "left" crowd represented in *Student Power* were operating on a quite different ideological basis. Their heroes were Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, Mao, Che Guevara, Regis Debray, Louis Althusser, Jean-Paul Sartre, etc.

This is not a matter of personal aesthetic-intellectual tastes. The authors' rejection of Trotsky flowed from their hostility to the perspective that took as its starting point the objectively determined revolutionary role of the working class.

Cockburn did not look back from this. Whatever critique of this or that feature of contemporary society he offered during the next forty years was never rooted in a scientific assessment of capitalist society and the contradictions that would inevitably produce social explosions.

After all, could a serious threat to the powers that be have been tolerated for a decade at the *Wall Street Journal*, a principal mouthpiece of the US financial oligarchy? When the *Village Voice* fired Cockburn in 1984, largely because of his exposure of Israeli crimes, the *Journal* kept the journalist on the payroll, noting complacently that "Interesting columnists come, like Cromwell, warts and all."

Cockburn's writing has a political sameness about it, from year to year. To a certain extent, he required verbal gifts and "spice" to disguise the fact that he was repeating many of the same truisms (at best) over and over again.

Going through the pages of the numerous books put out by Cockburn and St. Clair in the past decade, for example, one comes upon colorful accounts, interesting facts and even insights. The *New York Times* and Judith Miller receive a deserved pummeling, along with the *Washington Post*, Fox's Bill O'Reilly, Rupert Murdoch, Colin Powell, Elie Wiesel, the "war on drugs," Bill Clinton and Al Gore, liberal proponents of torture, and so forth.

Cockburn certainly had an advantage over those who were frantically abandoning every principle and joining the pro-imperialist camp in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the wars against the

former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and now Syria.

Nonetheless, while excoriating the American political system and media for its corruption and lies, the *Nation* columnist's petty-bourgeois radical outlook prevented him from learning anything qualitatively new about the objective situation, much less drawing any politically fruitful conclusions from it.

The deteriorating social position of the working population in the US was not a major concern of his, nor did he ever interest himself in the crisis of working class perspective and leadership—except to recklessly bandy about the idea in the mid-1990s of forming alliances with the so-called militia movements and other right-wing populist organizations.

Cockburn lashed leading members of the Democratic Party, Clinton and Gore in particular, but the overheated language speaks more to frustration and disappointment with the Democrats than any desire to break with this big business entity. The journalist never managed a class or historical definition of the Democrats that would have established a principled basis for opposition. Thus the door was always left open for the possibility that some "grassroots" revolt within the Democratic Party, some movement from below, might push forward a "populist" figure who would carry through a contemporary version of Roosevelt's New Deal.

Hence his support for the Rev. Jesse Jackson in the 1980s. Cockburn could still write the following in 2010 about that political snake oil salesman and "civil rights leader": "With his 'Rainbow coalition' Jackson ran for the Democratic nomination in 1984 and in 1988, with a platform that represented an anthology of progressive ideas from the 1960s."

Cockburn's advocacy of Ralph Nader's campaigns for the US presidency in 2000 and 2004, far from contradicting this analysis, underscores it. Nader and the Greens envisioned their efforts as a means of influencing the two major parties, or, as Nader explained, to "push" and "challenge" them. In 2001, he told an interviewer that he hoped the Greens would be an "electoral leverage from the left" on the Democrats.

This was essentially Cockburn's perspective, despite all the invective he could sometimes hurl in the Democrats' direction.

In April 2008, Cockburn headlined his *Nation* column, "Maybe One Cheer for Barack Obama," and commented: "Our tragedy is that we have three neo-liberals left in the presidential race [John McCain, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama], at a time when neo-liberalism has collapsed and life-giving divisiveness is on top of the Wanted list. I suppose, out of the three of them, I prefer Obama... But I don't think Obama is a real fighter. He's too pretty, and he doesn't want to get his looks messed up."

A comment by his longtime collaborator Jeffrey St. Clair in a 2004 interview is equally revealing:

"The only power the Left (loosely speaking) enjoys these days is the power of negation. We can't elect Nader or [the Greens' Peter] Camejo or Jackson. But we can defeat bad Democrats, like Gore and [John] Kerry. Until the Democrats bend in our direction or a new political party rises to challenge them. And it doesn't take much, other than courage, to make this happen—an all out anti-war and anti-free trade campaign waged in Florida, Ohio, Michigan, Oregon, New Hampshire, Maine and New Mexico... Those are the states that will force the power elite to deal with the Left. Until that happens, the Democratic Party will continue to move to the right, outpacing the Repubs on several issues."

In this regard, Cockburn and St. Clair are not distinguished from the pseudo-left as a whole, including the International Socialist Organization and numerous other "socialist" tendencies that conceive of the "left" as a lobby within the Democratic Party orbit.

For all his cutting remarks, his *épater la bourgeoisie* demeanor, his studied hedonism and cynicism, Cockburn remained a representative of a section of the middle-class intelligentsia, no doubt disgusted with the uncouth, vulgar and avaricious ruling elite, but thoroughly and impotently trapped within the confines of the existing order.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>