

The politics and origins of Britain's Spiked-Online—Part Two

By Zach Reed
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This is the second in a two-part series. Part 1 is available [here](#).

Spiked-Online has much in common with the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in France, which similarly justifies its anti-Islamic provocations as the defence of Western, secularist and enlightenment values.

Indeed, in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks at the beginning of 2015, it called for a “Fight for the right to be offensive, in memory of the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo*.”

The basis for the shared line of *Spiked* and *Charlie Hebdo* lies in their common origins and their social milieu. Like the pseudo-lefts who today espouse identity politics, both these journals emerged from middle class layers that in an earlier period identified themselves as anti-capitalist and even revolutionary.

As late as 2012, Brendan O’Neill still claimed to stand on the “left,” while Frank Furedi, the theoretical guru behind *Spiked*, sometimes calls himself a “libertarian Marxist,” unless this is impolitic and then he becomes a “libertarian humanist.”

The tendency that gave rise to *Spiked-Online* was formerly known as the Revolutionary Communist Tendency from 1976, until it changed its name to the Revolutionary Communist Party in 1981.

The RCP was the product of a series of unprincipled splits and expulsions beginning with an undeclared and politically diffuse faction in Tony Cliff’s state-capitalist International Socialist group, now the Socialist Workers Party.

The faction, beginning in 1971, was called the Revolutionary Opposition, and arose around the figure of Roy Tearse. It lacked any distinct programme or theory, so much so that when it was expelled by Cliff at the end of 1973 a discussion was initiated to determine its independent existence during which the grouping split apart.

Behind Tearse a group called the Discussion Group formed, eventually dissolving into the Labour Party. David Yaffe, an academic at Sussex University, emerged as the leader of the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), formed in 1974 and made up of students. It adapted wholesale to Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism, denouncing the working class as the beneficiaries of imperialism.

A short time after the formation of the RCG, Furedi began to criticise its line and he and a group of students around him were summarily expelled in 1976—forming the Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT). In 1981 the RCT renamed itself the Revolutionary Communist Party.

The RCP published a journal called *The Next Step*, in which it declared that “the working-class is a collection of groups which are all part of the revolutionary project ...” During the 1980s and into the 1990s it took an increasingly right-wing line, boasting that it was tackling the “taboos” of the left. In the midst of the yearlong miners’ strike in Britain starting in 1984, the RCP raised the demand for a national ballot as supposedly necessary to provide the strike with democratic legitimacy. This was the main demand raised by opponents of the strike and provided the basis for the formation of the scab Union of Democratic Mineworkers. It was raised when hundreds of thousands of miners were already locked in a

bitter struggle against the British state and the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and would have meant calling it off.

In the 1990s, in response to the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy, the RCP developed many of the concepts that underwrite the politics of *Spiked-Online*. In 1990, in its magazine *Living Marxism*, Furedi expounded the RCP’s new political line in an article, “Midnight in the Century.” The liquidation of the Soviet Union and the disavowal of national-reformist programmes by social democracy were cited as proof that socialism was dead.

The article typified the pervasive atmosphere of renunciation among a layer of the middle-class worldwide that was lurching to the right, repudiating any past association with working class and “left” politics as they sought to integrate themselves into the state apparatus, academia and the trade unions.

The experience of Stalinism, its collapse and the “defeats of Labourism and its variants in the West” had served to entirely discredit socialism and Marxism and render capitalism the only possible form of social organisation. “For the first time this century there is no real sense of a working-class movement with a distinctive political identity anywhere in the world,” Furedi declared. “[T]he left, as a force that represents something in society, no longer exists.”

The article declared that not all was lost, as long as those seeking change recognise “the irrelevance of old-fashioned left-wing ideas,” which “make little sense today. ...”

There was nothing original in Furedi’s article, which rehashed the worn-out cry of a petty bourgeois done playing at revolution. Having long ago rejected Leon Trotsky’s revolutionary opposition to Stalinism and social democracy, these layers were especially hostile to any need to work over the history of the 20th century.

Furedi went on to state explicitly, “It is not possible to somehow rescue or revive progressive ideas from the past and reimpose them on the present. It is not possible to turn the clock back and ‘defend the Enlightenment’ or ‘return to Marxism’. Karl Marx’s programme for revolution, formulated upon the experience of mass working class struggles, cannot simply be projected on to a situation where even the scope for individual subjectivity is so circumscribed.”

This became the ideological rationale for the RCP’s embrace of capitalism, which displayed in microcosm the process taking place among the entire pseudo-left. Furedi declared that the RCP’s missions was to promote “confident individualism” without any social constraints against a “culture of limits” or “culture of low expectations”—Thatcherite nostrums that would become the bread and butter of *Spiked* and its affiliates. In an echo of Ayn Rand, the aim was to advance the “actualisation of the individual against society.”

The main problem facing mankind was that the bourgeoisie had lost confidence in their own historical mission, due to the undermining of their intellectual foundations in the struggle against the left. In doing so, they had created a world of conservatism and risk-aversion. This rendered any

criticism of capitalism reactionary because “complaints about the destructive anarchy of the capitalist market can only strengthen the cynical conviction that everything is beyond our control.”

To counter the spread of conformity, *Living Marxism* embarked on campaigns against gun control, the banning of tobacco advertisements, the banning of child pornography and, most prominently, opposition to concerns at the effects of global warming.

Under the auspices of opposing “victim culture” and the “culture of safety,” *Living Marxism* argued that the least regard should be given to the views of those who have suffered as a result of corporate activity because they were obstructions to progress and freedom and their views would contribute to “moral panic.”

In 1997 the *Living Marxism* name was scrapped and replaced with *LM*. An editorial declared, “The spirit of *LM* is to go against the grain: to oppose all censorship, bans and codes of conduct; to stand up for social and scientific experimentation; to insist that we have the right to live as autonomous adults who take responsibility for our own affairs.”

The RCP was officially dissolved in March 1998 in an article by Hume calling *LM* a magazine that promotes “an agenda very different to that of the old left” and declaring Marxism to be irrelevant because there was no possibility of a politics based on the working class.

LM published an article by Ron Arnold, the executive vice president of the Centre for the Defence of Free Enterprise, calling for the destruction and eradication of the environmental movement as part of Furedi’s vision of a regroupment transcending left and right of “all those who believe human beings should play for high stakes.”

LM organised events with sponsorship from large corporate interests, including the Adam Smith Institute and FOREST, the front group funded by the tobacco industry.

The *LM* magazine came to end in 2000, after Britain’s Independent Television News (ITN) sued it for libel and was replaced by *Spiked-Online*. It has continued providing the same platform for the right-wing, corporate front-groups and think tanks such as the Hudson Institute and Centre for Global Food Issues. It has also received sponsorship from the telecommunication industry such as BT and Orange, and the Mobile Operators Association to host “debates” to downplay concerns of the impact of mobile phones on health and the environment.

Alongside *Spiked* also emerged the openly pro-corporate Institute of Ideas, headed by Claire Fox, which hosts the *Battle of Ideas* and is heavily focused on organising events on behalf of corporate sponsors. Alongside these are a host of other corporate lobbying groups, particularly around bio-technology interests, which have been established by individuals from within the RCP tendency and students of Furedi from the University of Kent. The various organisations receive corporate sponsorship ranging from pharmaceutical giants such as Pfizer, energy corporations such as Exxon and a host of others.

Furedi, a professor of Sociology at the University of Kent, was named in 2004 by the British Sociological Association as the “most prolific of UK sociologists.” He has released a series of books while contributing articles to the *Wall Street Journal* in defence of the infamous agrochemical company Monsanto and producing a pamphlet for the Centre for Policy Studies, a thinktank established by Thatcher.

The most infamous product of the *Spiked* stable was Channel 4’s “Against Nature,” aired in the late 1990s. Starring Furedi, it denounced environmentalists as Nazis, supposedly responsible for deaths in third world countries. Complaints were lodged against the programme for its distortion and misrepresentation through the editing of interviews. After an investigation Channel 4 issued an on-air apology.

The show featured other *LM* members, portrayed as independent experts, as well as contributors from the far right. Its director, Martin Durkin, was also identified as a former RCP member. He went on to produce another pro-corporate documentary for the GM-food industry and

another anti-environmentalist programme, “The Great Global Warming Swindle,” and a documentary on UKIP, “Nigel Farage: Who are you?”

An online blog by Miles King revealed that the climate change adviser to UKIP, known for its stance of climate change denial, is Ben Pile—another figure associated with the *Living Marxism* magazine, a regular contributor to *Spiked-Online* and a speaker at events of the Institute of Ideas.

This is a tendency that, through the individuals that compose it, is well connected with the right wing. Both Hume and O’Neill wrote for publications of billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch—Hume writing for *The Times* and *The Sun* and O’Neill for *The Australian*. O’Neill also contributes articles to *The Spectator* and *The American Conservative*. The self-proclaimed defender of enlightenment thought has opposed the legalisation of same-sex marriage and labelled opposition to Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to the UK as intolerant fearmongering. He is connected with the Australian free-market think tank, the Centre for Independent Studies, and was a keynote speaker for the pro-Israeli advocacy organisation StandWithUs. The organisation enjoys close ties with Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and receives a growing budget, standing over \$9 million, which goes towards funding student activities on campuses and, in particular, organising opposition to the BDS movement.

In the hands of *Spiked*, invocations of “free speech” are transformed into a justification for attacking broader democratic rights—above all genuine, vocal opposition to anti-democratic and reactionary forces and ideas. In its manifesto for free speech, *Spiked* demands there must be “no mob pressure on people to conform to modern orthodoxies.” One such example of “mob pressure” cited by *Spiked* is the protests against the French National Front leader Marine Le Pen to the Oxford Union debating society in 2015.

Spiked complained that those wanting to listen to Le Pen were “besieged by a violent mob,” with Tom Slater describing the protests as “illiberal and patronising.” Le Pen was to speak on “Western values.”

Spiked’s opposition to identity politics is from the right, insofar as the latter employs the language of “anti-imperialism” and selectively points to some of the historic crimes committed against the colonial peoples. Theirs is an attempt to rehabilitate the ideas of the far right, to promote the supposedly civilising mission of imperialism and thereby to turn universities into centres of corporate and state interests.

In 2004, *Spiked* chided the massive protests against the Iraq War of the previous year, describing the term “imperialism” as one of the “zombie categories” of the old left. Sloganeering against imperialism was regressive as it expressed “moral revulsion at the mundane world of politics” and contributed to an “anti-development” mood. The main problem, according to *Spiked*, was “the retreat from leadership and responsibility amongst the elite.”

For all their differences, *Spiked* and its nominal opponents in the identity politics crowd represent different variants of right-wing bourgeois politics. The combined result is to prevent a genuine independent discussion among students and youth around the fundamental issues they face of austerity, including its impact on education, war and the assault on democratic rights. The defence of free speech can only be conducted on the basis of a socialist political programme oriented to the working class and in opposition to capitalism. This is the programme of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

Concluded

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