

Britain: Reading University flags article on “ethics of revolution” under anti-terror policy

By Tom Scripps
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The University of Reading’s flagging as dangerous an article by the late Norman Geras, “Our Morals: the ethics of revolution,” is a major attack on academic freedom and a threat to democratic rights. The move opens the door to widespread censorship of the political perspective of revolutionary Marxism.

Under section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, teachers, lecturers and academic institutions have been instructed, under the government’s “Prevent” programme, to spy on pupils and students and to inform the state when they suspect people risk “being drawn into terrorism.” The threat of terrorism has thus far focused on Islamic groups and right-wing tendencies. It has led to thousands of Muslim students being subject to investigation.

The flagging up of Geras’ essay confirms that Prevent is an assault on the democratic freedoms of the working class as a whole. It is a police state measure that has now, for the first time, targeted an article discussing socialism and revolution.

After an academic insisted that Geras’ essay could flout the government’s Prevent strategy, Reading students were forced to follow strict “safety” guidelines before accessing a freely available article included as essential reading in a course on “Justice and Injustice.” Students had to submit a form detailing the material they were accessing and its relevance to their studies. They were warned not to access the article on personal devices, told to read it in a secure setting and not leave it somewhere it might be seen “inadvertently or otherwise, by those who are not prepared to view it.”

The lecturer in charge of the module wrote to his students, “The University understands its responsibility to require it to control access to security-sensitive material, which includes but is not limited to material which might be thought to encourage the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism; material which would be

useful in the commission of acts of terrorism; and material which glorifies acts of terrorism.”

In the face of opposition from academics and students the university stood its ground, issuing a statement that it had “put policies in place to take steps to prevent students being drawn into terrorism. One aspect of this is to safeguard staff and students who access security-sensitive materials legitimately and appropriately used for study or research.”

The situation is Orwellian. It is now for the security services, operating through Prevent, to decide where academic literature is “appropriate” or “legitimately” used, even when, as the lecturer noted in his letter, “These articles are widely available through electronic databases to which the University offers students access without any checks.”

In the place of free academic discussion, a climate of self-censorship is being created. Staff will refrain from recommending certain texts for fear of being branded terrorist enablers. The Reading lecturer closed the message to his class with the words “I am very sorry that you have to do this. I was informed of this policy after I had put together the module for this year and would have thought differently about what I included if I had known of its requirements.”

Students will be discouraged from signing up to certain courses and to avoid reading texts that might place them on a safeguarding list. According to the university’s statement, “Lecturers must inform students in writing if their course includes a text deemed security-sensitive, and then list which students they expect will have to access the material.”

The ultimate target of these measures is clear. The definitions of “terrorism”, and “extremism” have been deliberately kept loose in government legislation so that they can be applied to just about any form of political opposition. Reading proves that the ultimate aim is to

prevent the development of a socialist movement among students, youth and workers.

According to the lecturer, under the law, “Academic work defending the permissibility or appropriateness of revolutionary violence might well be thought to encourage the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism, and may glorify it, at least where terrorism is understood as the use of violence to encourage the government to do things.” An equals sign has been drawn by the security services between “terrorism” and a mass, popular movement against the government to justify the complete suppression of socialist thought.

Geras’ essay is written as a polemic against “Their Morals and Ours,” Leon Trotsky’s pamphlet against opponents of socialist revolution who criticized the Bolsheviks based on abstract moralizing. Geras states that Trotsky defended revolutionary violence against petty bourgeois moralisers, while insisting that the goal of socialist revolution, “the liberation of mankind,” means that “not all means are permissible.” Nevertheless, he insists that Trotsky’s views have “to be rejected.”

His essay is part of a body of writing, beginning when Geras was a member of the Pabloite International Marxist Group and ending in his advocacy of imperialist wars of “humanitarian intervention,” including the Iraq War, as a leading author of the 2006 Euston Manifesto. The manifesto saw “lefts” such as Geras align themselves with neo-cons in the Henry Jackson Society to assert the “duty of intervention and rescue” of the “international community”—a synonym for the imperialist powers.

On this basis, one of his collaborators, Nick Cohen, writes in the *New Statesman* of the “ignorant censorship” of Geras who “devoted much of his energy to opposing the murder of civilians, and lost many friends on the left in the process.” To allow such censorship of “a profound and humane thinker” would criminalise “all the arguments about just war going back to St. Augustine,” Cohen writes.

Except it is not Saint Augustine who is being targeted, or even Geras himself. He fell foul of the Prevent machinery because he wrote on the issue of social revolution, above all the October 1917 revolution led by Lenin and Trotsky. And if a hostile polemic on the subject is considered too dangerous to be viewed, then the collected works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky will soon be placed under lock and key along with the writings of countless historians, sociologists and, of course, political figures.

Choosing Geras’ essay opposing “Their Morals and Ours” indicates the central target of the escalating drive to bring schools and universities under state supervision and control is Trotskyism, the genuine expression of revolutionary Marxism represented today by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

In Germany, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality is leading the fight of German students against the state-sponsored growth of militarism and far-right ideology on university campuses. They have been hounded for this by the local and national right-wing press. Professors and the university leadership at Humboldt University have repeatedly threatened the IYSSE, including with legal suits, to silence their criticisms while the administration is now working to establish and publish a list of politically active students that would lay the basis for neo-Nazi attacks. Other universities have banned the IYSSE from holding meetings. Most ominous of all, the ICFI’s German section, the Socialist Equality Party, has been officially listed as a “left-wing extremist party” and identified as an “object of observation” by the secret service, citing its opposition to “nationalism, imperialism and militarism.”

The German events must act as a warning. The International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality calls on all students and academics to condemn Reading’s action and to demand that universities, colleges and schools end all collaboration with the government’s Prevent programme. We call on all those wishing to take part in such a struggle for academic freedom to contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>