

Review – Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde by Donald Robertson

It is just over a hundred years since the death of Scotland's best-known revolutionary Marxist, John Maclean. In the intervening century, Maclean's standing and reputation has waxed and waned, often reflecting the prominence of the national question in Scotland, an issue with which Maclean is understandably – if sometimes one-sidedly – identified. Over the years, there have been a number of important biographies of Maclean; most notably perhaps, that of his daughter, Nan Milton, in 1973, and, more recently, a well-received account of Maclean's life and politics by Henry Bell which came out in 2018. In addition, there have been numerous smaller studies of Maclean, highlighting, for example, the influence of Irish Republicanism on the evolution of Maclean's politics, his attitude to the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and his advocacy of Scottish Republicanism (and flirtation with 'Celtic Communism'). Decades after his premature death – accelerated by the brutality he experienced during his frequent imprisonments for antiwar agitation – Maclean's legacy remains complex and contested.

Donald's Robertson's new biography, *Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde – The Life and Times of Scotland's Greatest Socialist*, is a welcome addition to the literature on Maclean which adds to our understanding of his life and politics in important ways. First it is a substantial work, which not only takes us through the events in Maclean's life, but also outlines the political and social context in a clear and detailed way. Readers unfamiliar with the events in Glasgow in the first decades of the 20th century are treated to an extensive account of 'Red Clydeside' and of the struggles in the community (most notably the Rent Strikes of

1915) and at the point of production (in particular, against 'dilution' and for the 40-hour week) which characterised the period, and in which Maclean played a key role. The main aspects of Maclean's political life are also brought out clearly. His focus on working-class political education, including his long-term project to establish an independent *Labour College for Scotland* and his legendary [lectures in Marxist economics](#), conducted for well over a decade, where *hundreds* of working-class Scots were introduced to the foundational concepts of Marx's *Capital*. Equally, Maclean's phenomenal workload, his appearance at meetings and events throughout Britain, educating, agitating, and organising tirelessly against the bosses and their system, is outlined in detail. Above all, Maclean's internationalism (and international reputation), expressed most powerfully in his courageous opposition to the First World War and in his support for Irish Independence, and for which he paid such an enormous price in terms of his health and personal life, is highlighted.

Largely devoted to directly recounting Maclean's life and times, Robertson's biography avoids the controversies about Maclean which have tended to preoccupy the left (e.g. was Maclean's Scottish Republicanism a pragmatic response to the ebbing of the post-war upsurge or did it represent a prescient grasp of the importance of the national question? Was Maclean's advocacy of a distinct Scottish Communist Party the basis of his hostility to the nascent Communist Party of Great Britain or was it the other way around?). But if the author does not weigh in on these perennial debates, the book does bring out new material on Maclean's life which more than justifies its publication. First, Robertson has made skilful use of the newspaper archives of the time – and particularly that of the 'Glasgow Herald' – which are now available. This allows him to describe in detail the contemporary impact of Maclean, and more specifically detail the trials for sedition and under the 'Defence of the Realm Act' to which he was

repeatedly subjected. The best known quote from Maclean comes from one such trial, his famous ['Speech from the Dock'](#), delivered at the High Court in Edinburgh in May 1918, with its immortal line *"I am not here ... as the accused; I am here as the accuser of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot"*, but Robertson's research also sets out the 'evidence' laid against Maclean and highlights the lengths and means by which the authorities attempted to silence him and curb his influence.

Similarly, Robertson's access to the 'National Archives' for the relevant period throws new light on Maclean's significance and just how seriously the establishment took him and the movement he epitomised. In one of the most fascinating sections of the book, Robertson recounts the proceedings of the 'Imperial War Cabinet' held shortly after the armistice of 11th November 1918. The cabinet, which was chaired by Lloyd George, was made of Ministers from the UK, Canada, Australia, and South Africa as well as other leading officials. There were three items on its agenda on the 28th of November 1918; first, was it possible to prosecute the German Kaiser for war crimes? Second, what arrangements should be made to supply food to the war-torn continent? And third, what should be done about John Maclean, currently serving a term of hard labour in Peterhead Prison, and, more specifically, would it be prudent to release him? A debate ensued in which the pros and cons of releasing Maclean were considered. George Barnes, the Labour Party's representative in the War Cabinet, supported his release, highlighting that *"[t]he continued agitation about John Maclean constitutes a serious danger for the government. Mass meetings have been held in many places, including London, and resolutions continue to pour in demanding his release"* while others took the view that he should remain in prison. Of particular concern to the cabinet was the potential impact of releasing Maclean on the political situation in Ireland, and on the continued detention of leading members of Sinn Fein

such as Eamon de Valera. As it happened, the Irish authorities expressed no opposition to Maclean's release, and he was freed on Monday 2nd December. On his return to Glasgow, thousands of his supporters turned out to see him, his subsequent journey through the Glasgow city centre immortalised in Hamish Henderson's famous song "*The John Maclean March*".

Overall, *Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde* is a thorough and valuable addition to the literature on John Maclean. It reminds us of an important period when 'the Clyde ran Red' and highlights the mass appeal of Maclean's revolutionary message. While there are no easy answers for contemporary socialists in Maclean's story, his emphasis on popular socialist education; on the importance of internationalism and anti-imperialism; on relating to the actual struggles of working class people both in and outwith the workplace; and, finally, his personal example of courage in the face of repression and adversity are all things we can and should learn from. Donald Robertson's new book should certainly help us do this.

Reviewed by Iain Gault, Donald Robertson's *Great John Maclean Has Come Home to the Clyde* is published by Resistance Books and is available [here](#). A collection of Maclean's writings including this *Speech from the Dock* is available from the Marxist Internet Archive [here](#).

Donald Robertson was born in Kinlochleven. He co-founded the Australian music and arts magazine *Roadrunner*, was the first editor of *Countdown* magazine, and is the author of books about rock music. He lives in Sydney and blogs at roadrunnertwice.com.au.

Review – Against the Crisis: Economy and Ecology in a Burning World by Ståle Holgersen

Amongst the most overused terms in politics and journalism, ‘crisis’ must be a strong contender for the top spot. A quick glance at today’s news headlines reveals – amongst others – a nightlife crisis, a tariff crisis, a cholera crisis, a housing crisis, and – heaven forbid – an injury crisis at a leading football club! More specifically, for the Marxist left, the notion of ‘the capitalist crisis’ has played an important role in our collective political imaginary. How many times have we heard something to the effect that “as the crisis deepens”, the working class will shed its illusions and in due course will rally to the socialist cause? Stale Holgersen recent book, *Against the Crisis*, takes issue with both the conceptual confusion surrounding the concept of crisis and, more importantly, at the notion that capitalist crises should be conceived as opportunities for the left.

In relation to the first point, Holgersen proposes a working definition of crisis which comprises three essential elements, as he writes, “*Crises are events that 1) come relatively quickly, 2) are embedded in underlying structures and processes, and 3) have negative effects on people or nature*” (p.5) Thus, as a consequence, he is sceptical about the concept of a ‘permacrisis’ (the Financial Times’ word of the year 2022). As to the second, he stresses the role that crises play in sustaining the system and the political difficulties that they pose for the left:

"While crises can – in theory – help us to reveal and expose capitalism's weaknesses and problems, they are also – in the actual political economy – central to the reproduction of capitalism. Crises are a good starting point for criticising capitalism, but they also make it harder to actually overthrow the system"; (p.10) moreover,

"If opportunities – as defined in textbooks – are occasions or situations that make it possible to do something you want or have to do, and if opportunities – as conventionally understood – entail moments of excitement, optimism and hopefulness, and chances for advancement, then we must refrain from referring to crises as opportunities for the working class, the environmental movement or the political left" (p.16).

'Make the Rich Pay for the Crisis!' may be an attractive slogan but, as Holgersen points out, it is rarely the case that they ever actually do.

Against the Crisis focusses on the nature of the recurrent economic crises under capitalism and on the overarching issue of the ecological crisis. One of the main strengths of the book is how it analyses the specifics of each of these, their similarities and differences, and the complex relationship between them. Holgersen takes issue with the (reassuring?) view that the ecological crisis, in itself, poses a threat to the continued existence of capitalism. Paraphrasing Lenin he wryly observes, "[It] is more likely ... that the last capitalist will sell a jug of gasoline to his last customer in a world on fire; or that the last capitalist will order workers to use the latest technology to produce even more survival kits" (p.106).

In attempting to understand these economic and ecological crises, Holgersen applies an approach which combines both empirical data and structural analysis by way of a series 'abstractions'. Thus crises, Holgersen argues, need to be

understood simultaneously (1) at the 'surface level' (e.g. a financial crisis), which is in turn related to (2) the concrete organisation of nature/capitalism (e.g. 'neoliberalism'), rooted in (3) the crisis tendencies of the system (e.g. the increase in the 'organic composition of capital') which are finally associated with (4) the profit-driven nature of the system and (5) ultimately, with the underlying contradiction between use-value and exchange value which characterises the capitalist system as a whole. It is at these, more fundamental levels of abstraction, that both the economic and the ecological crises – despite their specificities and important differences – can be conceptualised as different manifestations of the same systemic imperatives and contradictions.

Holgersen applies this overall framework to a number of specific issues associated with crises under capitalism. Above all, he underlines the essential class dimensions of such crises. Far from us all being in the 'same boat', crises are caused by one class but typically paid for by another. More broadly he writes,

"[t]hat class struggle intensifies during crises of capitalism may sound like a dream to the left, who might be more than happy to welcome some extra class struggle. But most of this is nothing to cheer about. This is class struggle from above, subtly and quietly, often with murderous efficiency" (p.142).

Against the Crisis also includes a very useful discussion of the relationship between racism, fascism and capitalist crises. For Holgersen racism is a permanent feature of such crises, a predictable response "within a capitalism built for centuries on colonialism and imperialism", but "[w]here racism is the rule, fascism is the exception; if racism is the eternal answer to crisis, fascism is the exceptional solution" (p.187) and "[f]ascism is a solution when it seems that the crises will not be able to reproduce capitalism. In other words, fascism becomes a possibility when the basic hypothesis

of this book is challenged. Fascism is the shock therapy when capitalism really needs to change in order to survive" (p.194).

Holgersen applies a variety of theoretical frameworks to help illuminate the nature of capitalist crises, drawing on both the Trotskyist tradition, especially the work of Ernest Mandel and Daniel Bensaid, and on the 'left eurocommunism' of Nicos Poulantzas, and specifically, on the latter's concept of the 'relative autonomy' of the capitalist state. This represents a potentially innovative fusion of traditions that have traditionally been somewhat remote and indeed hostile to each other; the resumption of a dialogue that briefly took place in the late 1970's and was subsequently lost to history, not least by the virtual disappearance of the 'left eurocommunism' perspective by the early 1980's [\[1\]](#).

However, whilst Holgersen's book is theoretically rich and stimulating, in a refreshing contrast with much current leftwing theorising, it also focusses on the practical responses which capitalist crises demand of the left. Paralleling the analytical abstractions that he employs to understand the nature of crises; he distinguishes between three 'levels' around which the left should formulate such a response. In particular, he distinguishes between (1) crisis management (2) crisis policy and (3) crisis critique and argues convincingly that the left needs all of the above. In fact, it is the weakness of the left at the level of crisis management/policy, in contrast to its relative sophistication at the level of crisis critique, which leaves us vulnerable to collapsing into essentially 'Keynesian' solutions when the crisis actually hits. Holgersen rightly stresses the urgent need for the left to develop its own distinctive and credible crisis policies and proposes several possible sources for these; including a renewed programme of 'transitional demands', the advocacy of anti-capitalist 'structural reforms' and a strategy which operates simultaneously 'in and against'

the capitalist state. As he notes:

"Crisis and its causes are something we must fight against. Rather than opportunities we look forward to exploring, or moments when the fight for socialism is put on hold, the crises are problems we must solve" (p.19).

Overall, *Against the Crisis* is a fascinating and rewarding read providing useful material on a host of topics. If I have one reservation about the book it would be that whilst correctly stressing the 'destructive functionality' of cyclical crises under capitalism and their essential role in ensuring the reproduction of the system, it is not at all clear that similar considerations apply to the more long-term 'organic' downturns of the system which can and do span numerous cyclical 'booms' and 'bursts'. It is not of course that Holgersen is unaware of the distinction here and in fact discusses it at various points, but perhaps the relationship between these different 'crises' (indeed whether the latter is correctly regarded as a 'crisis' in the sense that Holgersen defines the term) could have been explored more thoroughly. The 'functionality' of capitalism's cyclical undulations makes much more intuitive sense than those of its 'long downturns', especially when the latter – for example in the case of the 'Great Depression' of the 1920's and 30's – required a cataclysmic world war to finally resolve. In a similar vein, whilst there is no guarantee that any particular crisis will be the 'final' crisis of capitalism, it doesn't follow that we can't or shouldn't talk in terms of an overall systemic decline.

Notwithstanding this, Holgersen's overall thesis is thoughtful, important, and timely. We can't rely on the crisis of capitalism to deliver the transition to socialism; on the contrary, it is only by finding the political resources to struggle effectively 'against the crisis' that we will find our way to a better society. Although crises typically and paradoxically strengthen the system, the ultimate challenge

is, as Holgersen concludes, to definitively ‘falsify’ this very thesis.

[\[i\]](#) See ‘L’État et la transition au socialisme. Interview de Nicos Poulantzas par Henri Weber’, *Critique communiste* (the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire journal), no. 16, June 1977 translated to English as ‘The State and the Transition to Socialism’, in *The Poulantzas Reader*, ed by James Martin (Verso, 2008) pp. 334-360

Reviewed by Iain Gault, *Against the Crisis: Economy and Ecology in a Burning World* is published by Verso and is available [here](#)

There is a *Scotonomics* You Tube interview with Holgersen which outlines the main themes of the book and which is well worth a look. It can be accessed [here](#)

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