

# Afflicted Powers

## Owen Logan



*Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*; Verso, ISBN 1 844670317, pb £10

"We are an empire now, and when we act we create our own reality."

**Senior advisor to President Bush**

The above quotation comes at the end of *Afflicted Powers* by Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Mathews and Michael Watts of *Retort*, an affinity group based in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> Their book draws on a range of academic expertise and its scope is ambitious. In an extended examination of post-September 11<sup>th</sup> geopolitics, the writers enter into a direct polemic against capitalism today, naming names and exposing the system's most dubious mechanisms. They are also willing to question the vanguardist inheritance of the Left and some of the too simple arguments which have animated dissent in recent times. They regard these as added burdens in the task of opposing the destructive forces of 'militarised neo-liberalism', a multi-layered oil-driven economy, entrenched zionism and 'revolutionary Islam'. Contesting the significance of the words "No Blood for Oil", for example, they argue that the war on Iraq was provoked by a deeper reversion within capitalism as it moves into a phase of 'primitive accumulation' geared up for a great deal more than oil reserves. Repeating its foundational epoch, capitalism is 'afflicted' by the need to further enclose all that remains common, monopolising, privatising and patenting. Even the genetic basis for life is turned into property. In his book *The New Imperialism* (2003) David Harvey calls this 'accumulation by dispossession', and *Retort* taking their title taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, remind us that caught as we are in this rapacious process, 'our powers are afflicted too.' So 'the Left' is a term which is introduced somewhat sceptically but as they say it is also the term they were 'least willing to abandon.'

The book's argument against 'the present order of things' is carried over six chapters: 'The State, the Spectacle and September 11', 'Blood for Oil?', 'Permanent War', 'The Future of an Illusion', 'Revolutionary Islam', and 'Modernity and Terror'. Before going further into some of the key themes of the book, it is worth considering the implications (and the risks) of its introductory frame – namely, the omniscient notion of power and the accompanying hyper-reality which comes about once a state is fully immersed in the logic of accumulation. Perhaps the best way to show what is at issue here is to quote more fully from the Presidential aide who, on the last page of *Afflicted Powers*, is edited down to that neat one-liner above. Here is the longer quote as it appeared elsewhere:

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and said something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we will act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you will be left to just study what we do."<sup>2</sup>

*Retort* are not members of the so called 'reality based community', their work is concerned precisely with the imperial production of 'reality'. Central to their argument, to put it crudely, is the idea that US imperialism has been advanced by a PR machine now running out of control. Even regimes which depend upon brute force also desire public justification, and this one more than most seems to live and die by the TV station as much as 'the sword'. Taken on in its own

iconic terms, the United States responded to the defeat of September 11<sup>th</sup> with the same logic of spectacle, partly revealed by the headline phrase, 'shock and awe'. After a relatively effortless demonstration of 'regime change' in Afghanistan, the US went on to execute a high risk war in Iraq, corruptly and irrationally, and is rather aimlessly maintaining an alliance with Zionism long past any real usefulness. Such counter-productive policies might be classically ascribed to 'imperial overstretch', or could be separately investigated in greater detail. In line with Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle, however, these policies taken together signal a broader kind of hegemonic crisis. This, *Retort* argue is the result of almost infinitely interchangeable material interests and ideological imperatives, which they call, 'the interweave' of spectacular, economic, and geo-political compulsions characterising military neo-liberalism.

We may appreciate the extent to which ideological conditions can drive politics into the wall, but is the spectacle – the mass-mediated arena of image-driven narratives – really as determining a factor as the 'dull compulsion of economic relations'? At the macro level of political economy there exist other priorities that are bound to finance capital, federal debt, and the significance of cheap fuel and goal of unfettered growth. Nevertheless, Debord's theoretical reasoning was that the spectacle represents an overwhelming explanatory power over such things. It functions to put everything into the most favourable frame for capital – a frame which amongst other things, strives for a zero degree of historical comprehension on the part of a public that is constantly thrust into 'an eternal present.' Academic studies, like those by Glasgow Media Group, show that the drive to spectacularise and trivialise news does function extremely well in keeping the public in a cloud of disinformation, and consequently disenfranchised. Indeed any civil society notion of the public interest is increasingly weak and fragmented by the marketised criteria of audience ratings, which substitute and conceal the issues of ownership and control in the mass media. *Retort* would argue, however, that there are dire consequences for the state once hegemony operates like this. The logic of the spectacle, reaches a point where it is too late for the state to rationalise its governance over what has inevitably become a flimsy democracy. In such a context the power crazed pronouncements like that of the Bush's aide can look increasingly credible. At some level, the American imperial mind is apparently absorbed in a politics of virtual reality, and almost by definition that is something that can be acted upon endlessly and without restraint.

Of course there are problems if one accepts such an ahistorical rationale of power. One consequence is that the same megalomaniac symptoms of image conceived politics can also appear as effective forms of dissent or resistance. This is the case for al Qaida, (as *Retort* argue at length in an excellent chapter on the postcolonial politicisation of Islam), but it can also impinge on ordinary activism in civil society. It is worth considering the spectacle of mass protest on which this book is silent. Or more precisely, to look at the way 'Third World' politics has been persistently modified and recuperated through the missionary zeal of charitable rock stars, to the point where recent campaign 'victories' of 'Make Poverty History' were actually synonymous with IMF structural readjustment plans. The media organised expression of the 'popular will' depoliticised and simplified the issues of poverty and inequality in a way that the Western political class could never have achieved alone. The mass media is fond of mass demonstrations. They offer the appearance of a functioning democracy, but public protest lacks praxis when it is backed up

by very little power as labour movements are disabled or isolated. Equally, those moments when labour acts in the context of broad public dissent, as in 1968, are fraught with tactical and strategic difficulties from which much can, and should, be learnt.<sup>3</sup> The same practicalities apply elsewhere. The US might possibly engineer a dignified exit from Iraq for its most vulnerable forces, if civil strife curtails the dimensions of hyper-reality there, but we should remember that the U.S. didn't lose in Vietnam because the Vietcong were similarly afflicted by image consciousness.

Theory can leave writers at a distance from the themes of a polemical text. The extent to which *Retort* disentangles geo-political issues and helps to reground discussion on the terrain of capitalism is important, but moving towards the central critique of capital would be more significant if it also sought a clearer understanding of the ideological structuring of the system. Such a task would be aided by a greater measure of cultural materialism in its method. For example, the US attachment to zionism, examined in the chapter 'The Future of an Illusion', is finally appraised on the basis that Israel offers its geo-political patron a mirror image of the white settler dream, but this might be less of a spectacular 'compulsion'. In *Jewish History, Jewish Religion* (1994), Israel Shahak argued '...support for Israel, when considered not in the abstract but in concrete detail, cannot be adequately explained only as a result of American imperial interests'. He instead pointed to the deadening ideological weight of Zionism in the Jewish diaspora, something which has exercised itself with a 'totalitarian cast of mind' at almost every political and institutional level. The theory of spectacle still offers a fractional insight here but elsewhere it tends to obscure how mass-mediated societies live and breathe. As at least one other reviewer has pointed out, the book dismisses some of the more organic functions in mass culture and is one-sided in this respect.<sup>4</sup> As Michel Foucault argued, where there is power there is resistance, but in *Afflicted Powers* the spectacle is shown as an operation which produces 'total obedience to the protocols of the War on Terror'. One only needs to think of the film *Fahrenheit 9/11* to know that this is a simplistic charge. Hans Magnus Enzensberger's 1974 essay *The Industrialisation of the Mind*, offered a more nuanced and intellectually reflexive approach which *Retort* might usefully have employed.

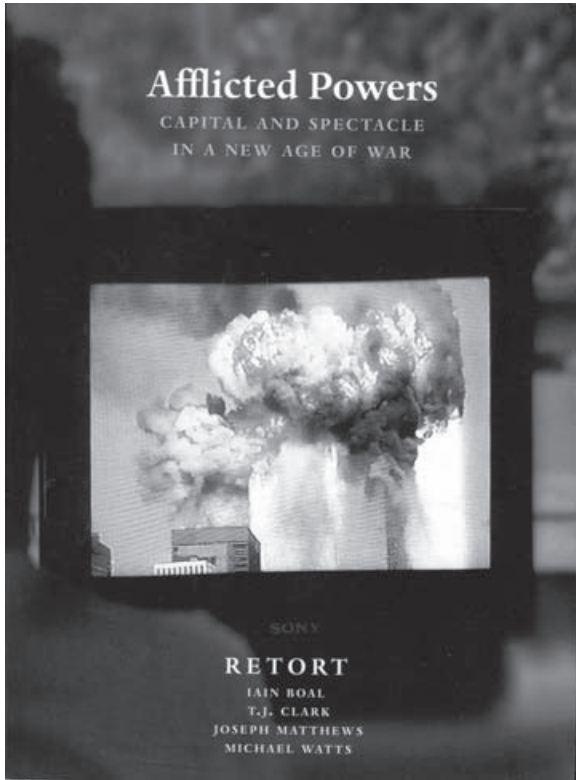
Although Debord's spectacle is a beautifully descriptive theory, it does tend to be taken up in ways which obscure the functioning relations of capitalism. This comes at a time when we need to understand capital in the same fictive terms as the image world it produces. The infamous fiscal rupture of 1971, when the U.S. abandoned their international commitments to a gold-backed dollar was just the beginning of a much broader financial destabilisation. That 98% of the international economy is now based on speculation, and only 2% on real goods and services certainly doesn't undermine the theory of the spectacle, but suggests that it could be applied more carefully and also against some of the vacuous assumptions which came under the umbrella of postmodernity. The phenomenal rise, indicated by the above percentages,<sup>5</sup> may be conceptually linked to the spectacle in the sense that 'reality' is increasingly a zone of subjectivist perception dovetailing with the endless relativism of a speculative market – a market founded on the ability to find an angle on anything and everything from debt default, social breakdown or civil war. The old advice that 'the best time to buy stock is when blood is running on the streets' has been turned into the more emotionally impermeable recommendation to 'buy the dips'.

Neo-liberal dynamism, the ability of the state and capital to collude in the creation and 'micro-

FILL HER UP,  
PLEASE







management' of new ideological conditions, as began to occur in the UK under Margaret Thatcher, encourages, and finally depends upon, an opportunistic balancing act. North Sea oil revenues paid for deindustrialisation and unemployment in the UK, but Thatcher's boldness was also influenced by the way her political allies were well trained in speculation. In *Fools Gold* (1994) Christopher Harvie repeated Alan Duncan's claim to have made a million speculating on oil during the first Gulf War and Harvie points towards the general rise of 'Casino Capitalism' to which the younger members of her elite were accustomed.

**The oil economy**

The popular idea that the invasion of Iraq was driven by the desire of the United States and a few of its corporations to get hold of Iraq's oil reserves is an inadequate way to grasp what has been going on. The slogan "No Blood for Oil" can easily be set up for a fall, and this is what *Retort* do arguing that while oil was an important factor it must be contextualised within the 'larger structural imperatives of the system'. Oil should not become a substitute 'for a wider capitalist nerve centre'. Interestingly in this respect, Donald Rumsfeld admits that "we lack the metrics to know if we are winning or losing the war." *Retort* end on the subject of oil saying that however it is calculated a 'few more million barrels of oil will not matter a damn'.

Moving on from *Midnight Oil* (1992) by the Midnight Notes Collective, and Jonathan Nitzan and Shimson Bichler's work *The Global Political Economy of Israel* (1999), *Retort* take up their argument about a 'capitalist ghost world' and a transnational constellation of embedded corporations in countries like Russia, Nigeria and Columbia operating within a greater 'oil-arms-military-engineering-construction-finance-drugs nexus'. 'Military neo-liberalism' here looks pretty much like capitalism revealed in truly dubious and subterranean form, yet it is also caught up in the crisis following the WTO breakdown in Cancun, and is unsettled by the cracks in the World Bank establishment. There would be nothing wrong with the extent of *Retort's* findings if they were arguing against a certain depth of significance around oil when they explore the decisive factors that led to the invasion, but they are not. So it is hard to see where exactly this leaves us because the question that *Retort* posits, 'about how oil's dominance is established' is absorbed in something like a whirl of phantoms. In other words the overlap between state and private interests is not really depicted. However, finding an answer here does require the recognition of an oil economy as a prism of forces. It is certainly more complex and dispersed than the use value of the resource, yet it also appears bound up by internalised fears. These may be rooted in the potential for internecine feud to escape existing controls. "What the industry wants more than anything is a stable appletart", is how a

CIA director put it.

The petrodollar system, whereby oil and other major commodities are traded in US dollars, means that the United States has been able, in the words of its critics, 'to produce dollars while the rest of the world produces the things dollars can buy'.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the neo-liberal project has been projected globally, an enormous federal deficit at its heart while fiscal discipline is imposed everywhere else by the global institutions like the IMF. As Niall Ferguson, the historian and great fan of the British Empire, is keen to point out, America is a debtor empire. The traditional motor for empire has been the need to invest surplus capital abroad but in 2003 the Wall Street Journal was instead asking; 'Is the US hooked on foreign capital?' It is, but for the time being, and largely thanks to petrodollars, 'dollar hegemony' prevails as a complex mechanism for drawing capital inwards.

*Retort* recognise that petrodollars make oil into a key item of market currency. They also say that only speculation explains the 'utterly baffling' mismatches between demand and prices. But they are less impressed with the implications of these dealings at a time when geologists predict an imminent peak in production capacity, a point when world demand outstrips supply. The fact that 'peak oil' looks like a bit of a smokescreen for different interested parties may influence their central assumption that OPEC will continue to function in the interests of the US even if OPEC countries gain a majority share of world capacity as supplies dwindle elsewhere. *Retort* point to other potential reserves which might enable the West to keep a fuller hand in a highly speculative game surrounding oil, but those reserves are unlikely to be easy to tap or as cost effective as the ones in OPEC control. Nevertheless, profits will be made as prices rise so *Retort* are probably right to dispel the issue of 'peak oil' as something of a red herring, but a 'cross over' to a greater dependence on OPEC reserves may not be a simple transition to negotiate. In such a context the maintenance of the petrodollar system, and with it U.S. Federal debt could only look more precarious than it already is. To understand the risks one has to look beyond Iraq.

In return for gaining access to the American market, China is now the major investor in the dollar assets. According to the *Financial Times*, 'Beijing is now a major prop for the US Federal Reserve and its policies'. This market-led 'Communist' support act would suggest that history still has its surprises. Worryingly, the current balance looks increasingly like the kind of delicate arrangement which preceded the First World War. Responding to the growing unease over dollar hegemony, and to much gossip about a 'petroeuro' prompted by Saddam Hussein's oil sales, a U.S. Navy School issued a reassuring paper, denying these factors as possible motivations for the war, and going on to outline the prospects for a soft transition should dollar hegemony come to an end.<sup>7</sup> Many things were left out of this military assessment of a happy United States living in the future without the aid of the petrodollar settlement and coming to terms with massive public debt. Perhaps the key issue, most studiously ignored, was how irksome is the negative rationale which forces central banks around the world to hold dollar assets. This is done in the knowledge that these are deeply insecure in the long term but in the short term are held as a guard against speculative attack on their national currencies. Were the U.S. to become like other national economies vulnerable to the threat of 'capital flight' it would not be a 'soft transition'. If collective economic pressures bear down on the home of the neo-liberal project the US will be in a weaker position in relation to its principle rival; China. It is difficult to see that kind of shift not having serious consequences for the control of a domestic economy, with an ageing population dependent on cheap fuel, car use, and heavily fixated on consumerism. Gross inequalities in the U.S. would be likely to reach intolerable levels. This far down the line no U.S. government could address that social predicament without a drastic shift in priorities.<sup>8</sup>

China, after the United States, is the second largest net importer of oil. The contingency of Chinese and American economic relationships

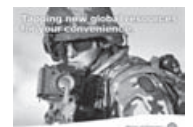
across a wide range of sectors is reasonably clear but the ramifications of Chinese growth are a major worry for the U.S. Eight months after 9/11, the American 'realist' political scientist, John Mersheimer argued that, 'the United States will go to great lengths... to contain China and to cut China off at the knees ...'. The U.S. may have gone to lengths that even Mersheimer, an opponent of the Iraq war, would not have advised. By July this year the Washington Post was observing a public dilemma in Beijing after the war 'destroyed China's hopes of developing large (oil) assets in Iraq', encouraging of course a greater dependence on American 'benevolence'. The subsequent reevaluation of the Yuan later in the same month went some way to meeting long-standing demands, helping to protect the American economy from cheap imports but the accompanying Chinese measure of a new 'currency basket' in Asia could possibly accelerate a fiscal reckoning for the U.S. Nobody can be entirely sure, and this uncertainty is the really important point. The U.S. is fast approaching a 'Third World' scenario of borrowing merely to service debt. As bad as things may appear for the U.S. in Iraq, strategic militarisation around the world's oil zones, and the establishment of new 'lily pad' bases, which *Retort* point to in their chapter 'Permanent War', offers the United States some insurance for its financial hegemony and can only bolster their side of the power balance with China.

What about the risks of civil war in Iraq providing greater fuel to Islamic fundamentalism and possibly alienating Middle-Eastern allies? Surely they were crucial factors that had to be considered in the decision to depose Saddam Hussein. Were those issues essentially overridden by a counter-attack mentality on the part of a luridly corrupt and rapacious nexus of interests – a capitalist ghost world – as *Retort* argue? Quite probably, but if that was the case then such motivations could only be strengthened, and indeed rationalised, within the different aspects of an oil economy. This is an economic arena that doesn't only represent the prospects of directly and indirectly derived booty (primitive accumulation). More importantly in this context, it signifies real weaknesses elsewhere in an interdependent system of oil and financial credibility. And ultimately it is weakness more than power that seems to force action.

**Modernity and Resistance**

It must be said that one could reasonably expect *Afflicted Powers* to link its nuanced appraisal of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism to some of the more concrete problems of effectively resisting its force. Such a task seems to be sidelined in a publication more devoted to the theory of the spectacle. Taking 'the main propositions of the anti-war movement ... to see if they could be reconstructed' is not merely a discursive task. In reflecting on questions of social agency the final chapter 'Modernity and Terror' skips through an account of the problematic 'vanguard ideal' which is more literary than philosophical and never touches down on practical debates about horizontal and vertical organisation. It toys with concepts such as 'multitude',<sup>9</sup> and 'the movement of movements'; ideas which have emerged from the anti-globalisation movement and which were given something of a boost by the sheer breadth of protest against the invasion of Iraq. These terms represent the politics in which *Retort* 'place most faith', not least, they say, because the pluralistic politics of multitude hardly depends on the apparatus of the spectacle. The complex dynamics surrounding the G8 meeting in Scotland point to a much more problematic reality. This is a book, like so many others, where the examination of activism against capitalist power eventually sinks into a mere text. If it were taken as a sign of the times it would only confirm how much democratic power is increasingly afflicted by abstraction.

*Retort* argue that the idea of 'modernity' must be called into question. If not, the Islamicist disenchantment with the postcolonial secular state, typically a 'failed state', may further define urban disaffection and the wider political scene. Yet populations, however erroneously, still strive for modernity. Politics turns on ideas but, as the authors might admit, capitalist modernity is hardly





going to be undermined, on some progressive intellectual basis, when it is also identified with benefits like health care, communications or washing machines, and not just consumerist excess. So it is difficult to imagine sections of humanity rejecting an already contingent sense of modernity, without first finding the way to collectivise its key benefits in some substantial measure. The success of Hamas (even if it is informed by a paranoid response to modernity) is partly based on that sort of social-welfare function. That is not to think in 'gloomy' or 'exultant' terms – a dichotomy which *Retort* see as being a problem for Left politics. Neither is it an unrealistic or 'unsustainable' proposition. If capitalism both inspires and forces people to cast their lives into its speculative logic, which for many means being propelled from rural collapse to the chaos of urban poverty, then the pace of diminishing returns, or the generalised sense of downward mobility, and a common environmental crisis on the planet, does at least invoke a greater scepticism towards individualist ideology. Of course the problem remains on what basis does a collectivist will manifest itself and how does it really act against accumulation and dispossession from above?

*Retort's* hopes are for the reinvention of Left internationalism. Grasping a strategic sense of internationalism is certainly crucial, to say anything less would be an understatement, but it is needed most so that the labour divisions and gendered parameters of organised labour and trade unionism might be redrawn and become more relevant and internationally responsive.<sup>10</sup> And to spite *Retort's* suspicion of Lenin's legacy, his precepts about the significance of trade unionism are not redundant in this respect. Left internationalism entails finally dispensing with the remains of Cold War politics in the international trade union movement if it is to move away from a tradition of voluntarism and towards a greater sense of strategic necessity. It also means comprehending the corporatist drive in modernity

(arguably its structural frame) in the suppression of both labour militancy and a free market, as well as its impact on revolutionary projects. The latter can be seen in the early penetration of Taylorist thinking into the Bolshevik programme, meaning thereafter that the typical Russian worker was regarded as a barrier to the communist modernisation project.<sup>11</sup> Corporatism, including its fallout in everything from Italian fascism to the utter bribery behind New Labour's partnership ideology, stands in the way of the Left's agency, and without confronting that political bloc, trade unionism cannot be creatively reinstated and it may be further eroded in our era of global capital flows and super-charged speculation. No doubt, as *Retort* argue, 'modernity' should be questioned but surely if the Left is not to take a lead from paranoid fundamentalism then it is important to concentrate on something less vague; 'modernity' might be an intellectually dignified term, but as a generalisation it is almost on a par with 'The Great Satan.'

It is hard to do justice to the scope of *Afflicted Powers*. At its best, in chapters like 'Permanent War', which exposes the violence that for some passed for 'peace', or in 'Revolutionary Islam', tracing the genealogy of that form of rebellion, the book succeeds in removing any sense that history was dormant at end the Cold War, or that liberal capitalism could ever be 'on track', destined somehow to be the final human arrangement. No doubt al Qaida have delighted in the hubris of the 'liberal empire,' an imperialism that fatally attempts to justify its plundering by institutionally, economically and ideologically replicating itself in every possible way. In this sense 9/11, was certainly the disaster on which US power awaited. The welcome opportunities afforded by future attacks are now openly contemplated. This dynamic mode of 'creating other new realities' must always be traced back (as *Retort* do) to its original sources. They precede Winston Churchill speaking to parliament in 1920

but he is a good spokesman for the long historic cause; "I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas ... I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes to spread a lively terror."

## Notes

1. *Afflicted Powers* is published by Verso Books (2005).
2. Ron Suskind, quoting a "senior advisor" to President Bush, cited in Niall Ferguson's, *Colossus*, (2004) Penguin Books.
3. Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (2002), University of Chicago Press, is a valuable account.
4. Julian Stallabrass, 'Spectacle and Terror' forthcoming in *New Left Review*.
5. From Bernard Lietaer's, *The Future of Money, Creating New Wealth, Work and a Wiser World*, (2001) Century Books.
6. See Henry C K Liu's, *China vs the almighty dollar*, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/DG23Ad04.html>
7. *Strategic Insights*, volume II, issue 11 (November 2003) 'From Petrodollars to Petroeuros'... by Robert Looney, Centre for Contemporary Conflict, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California. <http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/nov03/middleEast.asp>
8. For an extended examination of the different factors at play see Giovanni Arrighi's two part essay, 'Hegemony Unravelling' in *New Left Review*, Issues 32 and 33, (2005)
9. See *Multitude, War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004) by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, published by Hamish Hamilton.
10. In this respect internationally comparative 'bottom up' studies are valuable but they are few and far between. Scott Lash's, *The Militant Worker – class and radicalism in France and America*, (1984), published by Heinemann is possibly one of the most extensive and well grounded. Andrew Cumbers' journal article 'Embedded Internationalisms: 'Building Transnational Solidarity in the British and Norwegian Trade Union Movements' (2004) in *Antipode*, Blackwell Publishing, describes current challenges as well as the opportunities afforded by what might be called the end of – the end – of the Cold War.
11. For a broad based but concise study of this, see Paul Dukes' 'October in the Mind: The Russian Revolution, Freidizm and Pandisciplinarity' in *Revolutionary Russia*, (2002) Vol.15, No1, published by Frank Cass.